

# Understanding anxiety

## *Worries, fears and how extra tutoring can help*

Anxiety in primary aged children · for parents and carers of primary aged children

Anxiety is a **normal, protective feeling**: the body getting ready for danger. Every child worries sometimes. It becomes a problem when the worry is **out of proportion, lasts for weeks, or stops a child doing things** they need or want to do. Anxiety is one of the most common difficulties in childhood, and it is very treatable. It is not caused by bad parenting, and anxious children are not being difficult: their alarm system is simply set too sensitive.

### Common types in childhood

#### **Separation anxiety**

Intense worry about being apart from a parent, or that something bad will happen to them.

#### **Specific fears**

Dogs, the dark, being sick, loud noises: fears that are stronger and last longer than usual.

#### **General worry**

Worrying about lots of things, often “what ifs”, getting things wrong or being in trouble.

#### **Social worries**

Fear of being looked at or judged, speaking in class or joining in. A few children stop talking altogether in some places; this is called selective mutism.

### How it can show

- Tummy aches, headaches or feeling sick, especially before school.
- Asking for reassurance again and again.
- Avoiding things, or needing everything to be just right.
- Anger, tears or meltdowns, which can look like bad behaviour.
- Trouble getting to sleep, or nightmares.
- Clinginess, especially at drop off.
- Going very quiet or shutting down when put on the spot.

### The avoidance trap

Avoiding a feared thing brings instant relief, so the brain learns that avoiding works. Next time the worry is bigger and the comfort zone smaller. **Gently and gradually facing fears**, with support, is what shrinks anxiety.

#### **Perfectionism**

Many anxious children set themselves impossibly high standards. They may refuse to start work, rub out repeatedly or fall apart over a small mistake.

#### **Strengths worth noticing**

Anxious children are often kind, thoughtful, conscientious and very aware of other people's feelings.

#### **Often found alongside**

Autism, ADHD, learning difficulties and school avoidance (see our other sheets). Unmet learning needs are a common hidden cause of school related worry.

#### **When to seek help quickly**

If your child talks about wanting to hurt themselves, or you are worried about their safety, contact your GP or NHS 111 the same day.

*“Every child learns, some just need a different path.”*

Nicola, Moss Grove Tutoring

## Why one to one makes a difference

A lot of childhood worry is about learning: being wrong, being slow, being seen to struggle. One to one, at home, with nobody watching or comparing, many children can finally relax enough to learn.

## What sessions look like

- **Predictable:** the same time, the same shape, no surprises.
- **Mistakes made normal:** Nicola makes them too, on purpose, and talks about what she learned.
- **Small brave steps:** harder work introduced gradually once confidence is there.
- **No timed pressure** until your child is ready for it.
- **Worries noticed:** watching for signs of rising anxiety and adjusting before it overflows.
- **Calming tools** such as breathing or a movement break, practised when calm so they work when needed.

## Trust comes first

Early sessions may be shorter and gentler while your child gets to know Nicola. Once they feel safe, they are far more willing to try something difficult, and that willingness is the real goal.

### Signs of progress

Starting work without fuss, having a go at something new, laughing off a mistake, and asking for help instead of hiding. These often come before better marks.

## Working together

You know your child best. Before starting, Nicola will ask what has happened so far, what helps and what makes things worse. A short update follows each session, and with your permission she can link with your child's teacher or SENCo so that everyone is working to the same plan.

### Being realistic

Tutoring is not therapy and cannot treat an anxiety disorder. It can remove the learning worries that feed anxiety, and build the confidence that helps your child take on other brave steps.

## Small things that help at home

- Listen and name the feeling first: "You're really worried about this."
- Then encourage a small brave step, rather than removing the thing they fear.
- Keep reassurance brief; repeating it often feeds the worry.
- Show how you cope with your own worries, out loud.
- A short daily "worry time" can stop worries spilling into the whole day.
- Protect sleep, routine and time outdoors.

## Getting more help

Talk to your GP or the school. Many schools can offer a mental health support team, an ELSA or counselling. The book *Helping Your Child with Fears and Worries* by Creswell and Willetts is widely recommended by the NHS.

## Where to find out more

**YoungMinds** parents helpline: [youngminds.org.uk](https://www.youngminds.org.uk)

**On Your Mind Glos:** [onyourmindglos.nhs.uk](https://www.onyourmindglos.nhs.uk)

**TIC+:** counselling for young people in Gloucestershire, [ticplus.org.uk](https://www.ticplus.org.uk)

**NHS:** [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk), search "anxiety in children"

### About Nicola

Nicola has worked in primary schools since 2003 and has been a Higher Level Teaching Assistant since 2008, specialising in special educational needs, including running nurture groups.