



# Small Steps

Strategies to Support  
Anxious Children

**In the Classroom**



Small Steps is run by WayAhead - Mental Health Association NSW, funded by The NSW Mental Health Commission.

[Wayahead.org.au](http://Wayahead.org.au)

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# Introduction

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The WayAhead Anxiety Program provides information and support to people with anxiety disorders, their carers, family and friends: Small Steps is an Anxiety Awareness Program for Primary Schools, it grew from what we saw as an increasing need for awareness of anxiety disorders experienced by children.

Small Steps began in 2001 and is now funded by the NSW Mental Health Commission. The Small Steps program is an information seminar on anxiety disorders in children for parents and teachers of primary school children within NSW.

The Small Steps information seminar was originally designed to provide parents and teachers with information about anxiety disorders as experienced by children. The seminar was created with the aim of increasing early intervention.

While Follow-up surveys indicate that Small Steps seminars have resulted in an increase in referral rates, feedback from seminar attendees indicated that they wanted more than a diagnostic description of anxiety disorders, e.g. teachers wanted to know how to assist anxious children in the classroom. The most frequent suggestion for improvement of the seminar has been inclusion of information about anxiety management strategies. This workshop aims to fulfil this suggestion.

This booklet contains information about anxiety management strategies for children in a school setting. It is a guide for the use of anxiety management strategies for children who have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder; or showing behaviours/symptoms of an anxiety disorder.

This booklet should not be used as a diagnostic tool. If you have any concerns about a student in your class or need advice on anxiety management strategies, you should speak to the school counsellor, guidance officer, nominated student welfare officer or learning support team at your school. He/she will then advise on the most appropriate course of action.

If you have any questions about the contents of this booklet, please phone the Health Education Officer at Small Steps (02) 9339 6003.

For more information about Small Steps, or to book a Small Steps seminar, email [smallsteps@wayahead.org.au](mailto:smallsteps@wayahead.org.au) or phone (02) 9339 6003.

Reference: Anderson, J.C, Williams, S. McGee, R. Silva, PA (1987) DSM III disorders in pre-adolescent children: Prevalence in a large sample from the general population. Archives of General Psychiatry, 44, 69-76.

# Anxiety in Children

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Anxiety is a normal and natural response that occurs when an individual perceives a threat, danger or negative outcome or event. It is common and normal for children to feel anxious or fearful about a variety of different things during their development. After all, children are confronted with all sorts of new experiences and challenges as they grow up and learn about the world around them. In most cases these fears are transitory and do not significantly interfere with a child's academic, social or family life. Some common fears and anxieties of different childhood developmental stages are outlined below:

**7mth - Toddler:** fear of strangers, separation, loud noises, animals, large machines such as the vacuum cleaner or lawn mower

**Toddler to Middle Childhood:** fear of animals/insects, the dark, separation from parents, supernatural beings such as monsters, thunder and lightning, sleeping alone, 'bad' people

**Middle Childhood to Late Childhood:** supernatural beings, the dark, bodily injury, heights, getting lost or trapped, burglars, doctors/dentists, death and dying

**Late Childhood to Early Adolescence:** fears revolve around social or evaluative situations, e.g. being teased or rejected by peers, being embarrassed, dating, giving oral reports, taking tests, fear of death or physical injury.

For some children, fears and anxieties can have a significant impact on the way they perform at school, on their ability to make or maintain friends, and on their family life. Children who experience significant difficulties with anxiety can generally be described in the following ways:

- They are often well behaved and tend not to bother anyone
- They dislike trying new things
- They tend to dislike change or taking risks
- They have a tendency to highlight the negative consequences of any situation, e.g., "all the kids will hate me", "mum and dad will have an accident and die"
- They avoid situations or objects they fear, e.g., a child with social anxiety will avoid attending parties or participating in groups
- Physical complaints are common. Because some children don't have the vocabulary or awareness to describe their anxiety, they may express it via physical symptoms such as feeling sick, having a lump in their throat, or sore shoulders from muscle tension

# How do I know if a child needs professional help for their anxiety?

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Generally, professional assistance should be sought if a child's anxiety is causing them significant distress, if it is not age appropriate, and/or if it is interfering in their academic, social or family life. Listed below are the indicators for problematic anxiety.

- a. Interference:** Anxiety becomes problematic when it significantly interferes in the daily activities of the child, and/or their family. Children with problematic anxiety tend to experience anxiety about a wide range of factors and events that prevents them from participating in various activities. For example, a child may be unable to complete classroom tasks due to their anxiety, be avoiding various class activities, and frequently missing class due to sickness complaints.
- b. Age appropriateness:** Anxiety becomes problematic when it is not age appropriate as this often results in significant interference in daily life. If other children are displaying the same sorts of behaviour, then it is likely that the anxiety is appropriate. For example, children between the ages of 6 months to 6 years often show distress upon separation from their parents. However, children of 10 years of age usually do not become distressed when separating from parents.
- c. Distress:** Children with problematic anxiety experience high levels of distress due to anxiety. Questions for teachers to consider: Is the child becoming very upset when faced with their fear? Are they enduring fearful activities with a high level of distress?
- d. Length of time:** Duration of a child's anxiety is important to consider. Has the child been displaying anxious behaviour for quite some time, and which has remained reasonably constant? For example, if the child was anxious for 1 week whilst away at camp but has been fine ever since, it's unlikely that the child would require further assistance. However, if the anxiety has continued for several weeks to 6 months, depending on the form of anxiety, and has remained reasonably constant, causing significant interference and distress in the child's life, it may be an indication that the child is experiencing an anxiety disorder.

If a child in your class has anxiety that meets the above criteria, refer the child to the welfare arm of your school. For most schools this will involve teachers referring the child to the Learning Support Team, who may refer on to the School Counsellor; or for Independent Schools, a Special Needs Teacher, Pastoral Care Worker, or the School Principal.

# How can children with anxiety disorders be helped?

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Research has shown that children who experience problematic anxiety can be successfully taught how to cope better with it. Research indicates that the most effective treatment for anxiety disorders is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and, in some circumstances, medication. CBT aims to teach children how to face their anxieties and how to think about situations in a different way so they are able to better manage their anxiety. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy consists of:

Learning about anxiety and what causes it	(psycho education)
Learning relaxation skills	
Realistic thinking	(cognitive exposure)
Problem solving	
Gradually facing the fear/anxiety	(graded exposure)
Child anxiety management strategies	(taught to parents)

Some children might also partake in social skills training programs or assertiveness skills training. Teaching children these skills can help them to manage social situations with greater competence and confidence.

The treatment outlined above will not provide a 'cure' for anxiety but will teach practical skills to allow the child and their family to manage their symptoms better so that anxiety no longer interferes significantly in the child's life, and the lives of their family members.

Medication is sometimes prescribed for children who experience severe anxiety and who are having difficulty making progress with CBT. If medication is prescribed, it will usually be medication similar or identical to anti-depressant medication.

Many of the strategies listed in this booklet are based on the CBT model. However, they are not a substitute for professional treatment. If you are concerned that a child in your class has an anxiety disorder, please refer the child to the welfare arm of your school, e.g., the Learning Support Team, School Counsellor, Special Needs Teacher, Pastoral Care Worker, or the School Principal.

# Strategies

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## Recognising and understanding emotions and feelings

Our attitudes about emotions and how we respond to them can affect how children respond to their own emotions. Responses to emotions vary widely, from sentiments of “tough luck-get over it” to attempts to help another replace negative emotions as quickly as possible. For others still, a display of emotion causes feelings of awkwardness, possibly resulting in dismissal or a glib “Relax!” Whatever one’s response, experiencing emotions including negative ones is part of being human, and children need to learn how to cope and manage these feelings. How adults respond to emotions serves as a model for children.

Refraining from telling children to stop being silly when they feel anxious is an important first step in helping them cope with anxiety. Responding to others’ anxiety by dismissing it as ‘silly’, or saying “stop worrying”, will not teach children how to constructively cope with that emotion. Whilst their anxiety may seem silly, for the anxious child (or adult) their worries and fears are very real. Demanding they stop being ‘silly’ will usually do little to reduce anxiety or other difficult emotions. As counter-intuitive as it may seem, recognising and sincerely accepting what another is feeling can be the most helpful response we can give. Research has shown that simply validating and accepting another’s emotions can have a soothing effect for that person. Validation and acceptance of another’s feelings can be done by naming and sincerely accepting their feelings. For example, “I can see you’re very worried about this assignment.” Research findings suggest that acceptance and validation of a child’s feelings, as well as the naming of their emotion, can help them gain some control over their feelings, and help calm them. Your empathy may also increase the likelihood that the child will accept your guidance and discuss his/her fears with you in the future.

Explaining to children that anxiety and worry is normal, and that everyone experiences it, especially before tests, class presentations, or before afternoon sport can also be comforting. It may be useful to help children understand that while anxiety is uncomfortable, and may cause them to feel sick in the tummy, it isn’t a real sickness and won’t hurt them, and will go away with their worries.

Reference: John Gottman, 2005 <http://www.parentingcounts.org/information/timeline/>

### **IN THE CLASSROOM Activity 1:**

Teaching children to name different emotions and to identify where they come from can help them learn to cope with them and gain some control over them. Teaching children how to identify emotions could be done by showing them cartoon faces depicting different expressions and asking children to identify what feeling is behind each face. Feelings charades is similar, where children pick a card with a feeling word on it and then attempt to act it out for the class to guess what it is. Once the emotion or feeling is identified, ask the children to think up some reasons why the cartoon character might feel that way. Illustrations and feeling words are provided in the activity supplement on page 19.

### **IN THE CLASSROOM Activity 2:**

Ask the class to brainstorm times when they have felt worried or nervous, for example, before a class presentation. Help children remember the time they were last worried, then ask them to identify where he/she feels her worry/anxiety on a sketch of the human body. An outline sketch is provided in the activity supplement on page 21.

### **IN THE CLASSROOM Activity 3:**

Generate classroom discussion about what students have done, or could do, to help them feel better when they are worried or sad. This could involve calm breathing, or helping themselves feel brave by telling themselves, "I can cope", "I can try my best", "I am brave." More examples of ways to help children feel better are listed in the activity supplement on page 22.

**NB:** These exercises might be particularly relevant to children if undertaken close to a stressful or unfamiliar event, such as shortly before a significant excursion, or before NAPLAN tests.

## **Relaxation skills**

Anxiety often involves many physiological sensations which can be uncomfortable, distressing, and alarming. After teaching children about anxiety (see *Recognising and understanding emotions and feelings*), teaching them how to reduce and improve the physiological sensations that go with it can be empowering. Relaxation skills such as slow breathing and progressive muscle relaxation are skills a child can use at almost any time once these skills have been mastered.

### **IN THE CLASSROOM Activity 4:**

Consider running relaxation exercises regularly to help children learn them. You could try having a key word for a relaxation exercise that you will use at some point during the day, and at which everyone should stop what they're doing and practise this skill. Examples of relaxation exercises are listed in the activity supplement on page 23.

## **Helping children think it through**

Children with anxiety often think of the worst case scenario and will seek reassurance from adults in an attempt to allay their fears. Instead of providing all the answers, help children think through the reasons for the worries. If the opportunity arises, encourage them to think carefully and realistically about a situation they are anxious about by asking them to think about:- 'Why do you think that will happen?', 'What has happened before in this situation?', 'What else could happen?', 'What general things do I know about this situation?', 'What is more likely to happen?', 'What has happened to other people?'. If they are thinking unrealistically\*, challenge them by asking for evidence for these thoughts.

**NB:** If they have genuine fears about physical bullying, or failing a test due to learning difficulties, this approach would not be appropriate. It is aimed at children whose fears are excessive and unrealistic, not in all situations.

## **Healthy thinking and self-talk**

Self-talk is what we say to ourselves in our heads. For example, when you hand in an exam, you might be thinking "Phew! I'm glad that's over. Now I can relax!" This is self-talk. Negative self-talk is characteristic of anxious children (and adults). Negative self-talk is when what we say to ourselves focuses on the worst case scenario, or on what could go wrong. Anxious people are often very self-critical, and tend to think the worst of themselves or of an ambiguous situation (e.g. "I'm hopeless, I know I can't do this, everyone will laugh at me"). This tone of self-talk provokes feelings of anxiety, not to mention hopelessness.

Scenario	Unhealthy thinking	Healthy thinking
Mum is late home	Mum's late. What if she's been in a car crash?	Mum's late as usual
Speech preparation	What if I start stammering in the middle of my speech?	
Theatre sports activities		I felt uncomfortable but so did everyone else
Class Test	I can never get it right	
New craft activity	I will mess it up. I'll never be able to do it. What's the point in trying?	I'm just going to try my very best
Maths lesson		It's OK to ask questions if I don't understand
Peer group conflict		I'm not a loser if someone doesn't like me. No one is liked by everyone
Knock over a toilet roll display at Coles	Now the shop keeper will be angry with me.	

Discussing self-talk with children will often confuse them because most of us, let alone children, don't realise we do it. However, you can still encourage positive self-talk without having to explain the concept to children. This could be done by encouraging students to think of positive things to themselves in their heads when faced with challenges or set backs. E.g. "I can do it!" or "I can try my best." "I'm brave enough for this," "I know I can do it".

### **IN THE CLASSROOM Activity 5:**

Have the class brainstorm positive self-talk statements they can say to themselves when they are challenged. If they are having difficulty thinking of what to say, ask them to think of something nice they'd say to help or encourage a friend to be brave when they're scared or worried. As a creative exercise, print these statements in various fonts for children to colour and decorate, or ask children to draw statements in their own fonts. Perhaps you could laminate these statements and display them around the classroom. Explain to children that they can say kind, brave things to themselves in their head when they are having troubles without anybody else knowing. In the classroom setting, teachers can model positive self-talk by speaking it aloud. Examples are provided in the activity supplement on page 28.

## Problem solving skills

When we are anxious, we think emotionally, not logically. Problem-solving skills training involves learning a systematic way of approaching problems so that they are manageable rather than out of control.

There are various questions that can be asked to help children learn how to think through their problems. When a problem causes anxiety, it is often helpful to write it down before trying to work it out. The table below is an example of a problem solving strategy.

What is the problem? : .....

What are all the things I can do to handle it?

1. ....

2. ....

3. ....

What will happen if I do each of those things?

1. ....

2. ....

3. ....

Which way of handling it is the best? .....

Now that I have tried it, how did I do? .....

Can I do anything differently next time? .....

Although it seems like common sense, when people are anxious it is often difficult for them to follow common sense.

References: [www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com); Pinto Wagner, 2002; Rapee, Wignall, Spence, Cobham, & Lineham, 2008

## Gradual exposure to fears

One of the main ways in which anxiety is maintained is through avoiding anxiety provoking situations. Adults can help children overcome their fears by helping them to reduce this avoidance and gradually face them. Gradual exposure involves overcoming fears by taking small steps towards facing them.

A common example is fear of public speaking and class presentations. Whilst everyone experiences this to some extent, some children are completely debilitated by it. A high level of public speaking anxiety may be particularly evident in children who rarely participate in class discussions and who are withdrawn. Helping these children to face their fears might involve starting to ask them yes-no questions you know they could answer in class discussions. Once the child becomes accustomed to this, begin asking open-ended questions in a similar context. Once the child is comfortable with this (they will need to do each step several times to become comfortable with it), perhaps provide opportunities for them to present to other children in small groups. Once they're confident in this, have them present in front of the class with one or two other children. Alternatively, a student may just need some extra help in preparing a class presentation, and a couple of practice sessions with just the teacher, or the teacher and some classmates, may be enough.

**NB:** Anxiety in anticipation of exposure may be higher than anxiety during actual exposure

**Below is an example of a plan to help a child overcome a specific fear.**

**FEAR:    Masks (Maskaphobia)**

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Step 1:    Look at a book featuring pictures of masks

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Step 2:    Make papier-mache or felt masks in small groups

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Step 3:    Encourage children to look at masks others in their group have made (whilst not being worn)

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Step 4:    Bring in some larger toys to put masks on

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Step 5:    Children wear the masks they made on their heads

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Step 6:    Children wear the masks they made on their faces

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## Reward brave behaviour

While attention can reinforce undesirable behaviour, it can be used to reinforce desirable behaviour. For anxious children, aim to reward any brave or coping attempts made. This brave behaviour could include a reduction in the amount of reassurance sought. When a child with anxiety does anything that is courageous or appears to be making an effort to cope, it is important to specifically praise the behaviour that was pleasing. Specific praise is important as it informs the child of exactly what it is that they did that was praiseworthy. When children know exactly how to gain approval, it increases the likelihood that they will repeat that behaviour.

The specific praise needs to be given immediately after the child has changed their behaviour from undesirable to desirable.

**Quick in-session activity:** Brainstorm examples of rewards for behaviour such as when a child stays calmer than usual in an anxiety provoking situation, and how that could be rewarded immediately after. Brainstorm ways to promote bravery\* in the classroom.

Rewards for brave behaviour:

.....

.....

.....

Ways to promote brave behaviour:

.....

.....

.....

**NB:** Ensure that children know what brave behaviour is, e.g., "Being brave means trying your best even when you are frightened".

## Self-regulation: regulating our responses to anxious children

Self-regulation refers to monitoring and regulating our responses to anxious children, with the aim to avoid over-protection and rescuing, as well as anger and frustration.

When adults rescue children from anxiety provoking situations, or protect them from anxiety provoking situations, they give children several unhelpful messages. For example, that the adult does not believe the child can cope with the situation, that the situation is dangerous, that when they are anxious they will receive lots of comfort, protection, and warmth.

Conversely, when adults respond to anxious children with frustration and anger, children's anxiety will likely be exacerbated, as angry and frustrated adults are intimidating for children (as well as for other adults).

When responding to anxious children, aim to respond with some warmth (empathy) yet firmness. Empathy

involves being able to put yourself in another's place. With anxious children, sincerely telling them you can see that they are worried, upset, or anxious (i.e. recognising their emotion) is giving them empathy. By doing this you are validating the child's feelings and taking it seriously (see *Recognising and understanding emotions and feelings* for a thorough explanation).

Firmness involves keeping your own anxiety/frustration/anger in check whilst telling the child the behaviour you'd like to see (e.g. participating in an activity, trying their best). It is important that adults are firm in directing the child because children experiencing anxiety will want to avoid the anxiety-provoking stimulus. If adults are not firm and allow children to easily avoid what provokes their anxiety, the anxiety in relation to this particular context will remain and perhaps increase the next time they need to confront it.

**REMEMBER:** anxious children's minds and bodies are telling them there is danger, but don't allow yourself to be tricked into believing this as well! Whilst a person's fear response can be very alarming, remembering that the child is not in mortal danger is crucial to maintaining a firm stance.

**Summary:** Adults should aim to be empathic but firm with children who are anxious. Remind yourself that you are not placing a child in mortal danger when you are firm and insistent on them going through with a situation.

**NB:** For children with anxiety disorders/extremely high anxiety, their behaviour might clearly indicate they are unable to cope with their anxiety in a particular situation. In any situation when helping people face their fears, the principle is that the person needs to stay with the anxiety-provoking situation long enough for their anxiety to peak and then decline. If you believe it is unlikely that the child will be able to remain in the situation long enough to experience their anxiety peak and then decline, it will be counter-productive to make them face their fear. In such instances where they escape the situation before their anxiety peaks and declines, they will only have memories of their high anxiety and how they couldn't stand it, subsequently making it harder to get them to face it in the future.

Refer the child to the welfare arm of your school, e.g., the Learning Support Team, School Counsellor, Special Needs Teacher, Pastoral Care Worker, or other, if a child's anxiety is in this category.

## Planned ignoring of undesirable behaviour

Planned ignoring of undesirable behaviour involves a gradual reduction in the amount of attention given to a child's anxious/undesirable behaviour. The rationale behind this strategy is that attention serves as a behavioural reinforcer.

"Planned" refers to thinking ahead about how to respond to a child's anxiety the next time it occurs. A plan is required regarding how you'll do this because it is very difficult to change behaviour response patterns, and even harder when it has not been given forethought. Planned also refers to the child's perspective. Children should be informed of your plan so that they know how you are going to react before their anxiety recurs. "Ignoring" refers to stopping any interaction with the child for as long as they are enacting the undesirable behaviour.

Once a plan has been made, it is important to talk to the child about how a certain behaviour will be ignored so that the child knows what to expect the next time they behave that way. It is important to inform children of 'your plan' because when an adult suddenly starts ignoring a child's behaviour that once received attention,

the child may think that the adult no longer likes them, etc., (Remember: anxious children often think of the worst case scenario). Be aware that anxious children may escalate their behaviour to try and get the adult's attention if they are ignored. Adults should be sure to inform the child of how they can regain attention and what behaviour the child should enact, namely stopping the anxious behaviour (e.g. complaining, whining, reassurance-seeking) and engaging in coping behaviours, or use coping skills they have learned (e.g. positive selftalk, slow breathing). Giving praise is crucial when the anxious/undesirable behaviour stops, and again when they are trying to be brave and cope. Be sure to explain the planned ignoring strategy when the child is not experiencing any anxiety.

This strategy must always be used carefully and only in relation to a specific behaviour. It is important to explain to the child that it is the particular behaviour that is being discouraged, not the child themselves.

**Quick in-session activity scenarios:** Discuss how you would implement a planned ignoring strategy with a particular child, for example, when they predictably complain of stomach or leg pains constantly prior to school assembly; when they cry in assembly lines each morning; when a child gets teary and upset about a change in routine; create your own scenario.

## Reassurance

**Limiting it:** When adults give anxious children excessive reassurance they may be helping the child to cope with anxiety in the moment, but this will not benefit the child in the long-term. When an adult gives a child all the reassurance they ask for, the adult is in effect taking away the child's anxiety for them (i.e. as the child receives reassurance their anxiety dissipates). As a result, the child does not have the opportunity to learn to cope with their anxiety independently. In addition, imparting excessive reassurance may send a covert message that the adult is concerned about what the child is anxious about, which may arouse even more anxiety in the child. Giving excessive reassurance can result in the child and adult becoming caught in an argument about the rationality of the child's anxiety, which is often counterproductive. Therefore aim to limit the amount of reassurance given to anxious children.

If a child has been receiving a lot of reassurance, gradually impose greater limits on reassurance. Bring in planned ignoring by informing the child that, for example, three of their reassurance requests will be answered but any additional reassurance requests will be ignored. Use the opportunity to prompt the child to think on the reassurance they've already received.

**Being descriptive:** Be descriptive with the reassurance that you do give. Non-descriptive reassurance is characterised by statements that gloss over the child's (or adult's) worry, such as "Don't worry", "Relax", or "It will be OK". Descriptive reassurance describes why there is no need to worry. Acknowledging the child's feelings before giving descriptive praise is also important in teaching them to understand their feelings. "I can see you're worried about making a mistake, but there's no need to because all I want is for you to try your very best." Assisting children to engage in problem solving after you've given descriptive reassurance may help them develop coping strategies.

Reference: Campbell, M.A. (2006). Anxiety in early Childhood. *Educating Young Children*, 12(2), 3133.

**Quick in-session activity:** Recall a situation where you gave reassurance. How could you change that to descriptive reassurance, or encouraging problem solving?

## Encourage independence

Anxious children often exhibit little belief in their capacity to handle day-to-day challenges, perhaps because they have not had much experience with them due to being repeatedly over-protected. To help these children become braver in the face of daily tasks and challenges, aim to foster independence in these children. This could involve asking them to run errands for you, to write instructions on the whiteboard for you. Aim to gently but persistently push them beyond their comfort zones.

**Quick in-session activity:** What are some ways through which you could foster independence in children in your class and school?

## Small group structured activities

Children with high levels of anxiety are often anxious about what others think of them, about being as competent as their peers, and about getting not making mistakes. As a result, anxious children typically have more difficulty participating in whole class activities than their less anxious peers. Running small group structured activities provides a safer environment for anxious children to participate, where there are fewer peers observing them, and they understand what they have to do. This may assist them in feeling more comfortable participating in activities, which may lead to a boost in their confidence when interacting with others.

**Quick in-session activity:** What extra-curricular activities could you run in small groups as opposed to a whole class activity?

## ‘Time out’ pass

Provide a time-out card for children to use if their anxiety becomes unbearable and they feel they need to escape. Designate a place for the child to go at these times (e.g. the library). The child carries this card with them, and when they need to leave the classroom, they place it on the teacher’s desk before leaving the classroom. Consider limiting use of the card by permitting the child to only use it once per day or session.

## Classroom routines

Anxious children are prone to distress when there are unexpected changes in routine. Consider developing a classroom routine and have a student volunteer write it up on the board each morning. Or display visual timetables. Having predictable routines can help children feel less anxious.

## Mistakes are OK!

People who are perfectionistic commonly experience anxiety about the prospect of making mistakes, or of drafting less-than-perfect work. Changing a child's beliefs about the consequences of mistakes is far beyond the scope of their teacher, but there are steps that can be taken in the classroom to encourage a healthier attitude towards mistakes. Teachers can demonstrate that mistakes are OK through how they respond to student's mistakes. Emphasise the importance of a sincere effort rather than a correct answer. Foster a classroom environment where mistakes are accepted and the lessons learned from them are highly valued, emphasise that mistakes can be very helpful because people can learn a lot from them. Talk to the class about ways to cope with mistakes. Hold a classroom meeting about how children should behave and respond when fellow students make mistakes in class. Brainstorm ways all class members can sensitively point out others' mistakes.

## Additional strategies

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### Modelling calm responding

As you know, children learn much through observation, including anxious coping strategies and behaviour. Attempting to model calm, non-anxious responses whenever possible sets a positive example for children. This means that adults may need to gain a better understanding of their own anxiety, when their anxiety tends to surface, and ways they can keep their own anxiety under control. Adults may need to plan how to improve coping in anxiety-provoking situations. However, your own anxiety can be used to benefit children. Talking to your students about your own worries (where appropriate) and how you constructively cope with them will set a more beneficial example about coping with difficulties than pretending you never experience worries or challenges.

### Give specific instructions

To help minimize the reassurance that anxious children may seek, aim to give them specific instructions so that they know exactly what it is they need to do.

### Minimise options

Anxious children may have particular difficulty making decisions. Give anxious children a small number of options, preferably "either/or" options. Reducing their options facilitates easier decision making whilst still giving them practice at it.

### Extra patience

Anxious children often worry about what others think of them, whether they'll get the answer right, and what will happen if they get something wrong. All this worry can mean that they take a bit longer to complete various classroom tasks. Patiently allowing anxious children extra time to answer questions in classroom discussions, or to make a suggestion, can mean the difference between them participating and feeling

valued, and not participating at all. Anxious children might need 10 seconds more to answer a question, but it's important to allow them this time. Any experiences they have where they face their anxiety, attempt something difficult, or try something new, and get through it will reinforce that behaviour. Be aware that anxious children tend to interpret ambiguous situations as more threatening than they really are.

## Maintain normal discipline and boundaries

Allowing children to escape discipline for misbehaviour because they are easily upset or provoked to anxiety is counter-productive. Whilst no one likes causing children to become upset, if boundaries and expectations are not maintained, and discipline avoided for fear of making the child worry or fretful, this tells children that they can get away with breaking the rules if they're anxious. As a result, children may perpetuate anxious behaviour in an attempt to get out of trouble. To compound the problem, other children in the classroom or at home may observe this pattern and begin feigning anxiety to escape problematic or disciplinary situations.

## Be consistent

Changing any behavioural response pattern is difficult it takes time and practice, consistency and perseverance. When responses are inconsistent children receive mixed messages about which behaviour is desirable, and about adults' expectations of them. If adults are not consistent in their handling of anxiety in children, it will take much longer to affect the undesirable and anxious behaviour.

To assist the consistency cause, perhaps you could consider displaying reminders for yourself. This could be as simple as a post-it note on the wall or a helpful quote. Regularly review anxiety management plans that have been developed for specific children.

Consistency between teachers is also important. It may be helpful to inform other teachers that come into contact with a child about the anxiety management strategies that are being used.

## Positive relationships between teacher and student

Teachers can have enormous influence on children. Developing a positive relationship with an anxious child may give them extra motivation to try to be brave when they're asked. Children are more likely to make an effort to be brave when a teacher they like requests this of them.

## Assigning a buddy

If a child with anxiety has missed a lot of school, they may be very anxious about how they will cope when they return. To help reduce their anxiety, assign a responsible buddy to help them catch up on their school work. This buddy need not be a friend but should be a student who is reliable and responsible.

# Frequently asked questions

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## Anxious or naughty?

For some children, getting into trouble is less frightening than facing what makes them anxious. If you suspect that a child's misbehaviour is being fuelled by anxiety, look for more evidence for this. Perhaps they ubiquitously misbehave prior to a certain lesson or activity.

If you suspect misbehaviour is due to a child's anxiety, consult your Learning Support Team or School Counsellor for advice.

## Separation anxiety

Separation anxiety is very common in primary school children. If a child experiences separation anxiety, empathetically encourage the parent to initiate quick separations in the morning and to keep any distress on their part hidden from their child. Try to explain, in an understanding way, that when parents become distressed in front of their child upon separation, and prolong the pending separation, a child will usually become even more upset. Other strategies that may assist include having someone else drop the child off at school. It is worth considering whether there are other factors. Making separation difficult including bullying at school, or undiagnosed learning difficulties.

## Anxiety around exams

If children in your class become extraordinarily anxious (most children will experience some anxiety) around tests, consider seating them away from other children, or at least where they cannot view other children. Anxious children may become more anxious by just looking at other children writing their answers, perhaps believing that they themselves don't know them. Allowing some extra time may help settle their anxiety and may even obviate the need for it.

## What about children with diagnosed anxiety disorders?

Seek information from the child's parents and health care professional about how you can best assist the child's progress in the classroom.

## When to refer to your Learning Support Team or School Counsellor

Monitor a child's behaviour. If they are displaying a consistent and persistent pattern of anxiety that causes significant distress and disruption, and this persists for 6 months or more, discuss the situation with the Learning Support Team or School Counsellor.

Remember, 1 in 10 children will experience an anxiety disorder at some point. Early intervention and treatment provides the best outcomes for children.

Discussing your concerns with the child's parent, where appropriate and if within school policy, may encourage parents to seek help for their child outside the school setting.

# Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) Specific Strategies

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The strategies listed below provide a general guide on how to respond to OCD in the classroom. Always defer to advice from the child's mental health professional or similar when available.

Read about obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) to increase your understanding of what your student is experiencing. Most people with OCD are ashamed of their condition, so your understanding may help your student feel more at ease with you.

## **Try not to provide reassurance or participate in ritualistic behaviours.**

The classroom climate may determine the degree to which a child is prepared to face anxiety-provoking experiences. Keeping stress levels low is important, and teachers are encouraged not to threaten or punish a child with OCD because of tardiness, forgetfulness or procrastination. Organise class activities so that the child has a partner, e.g., safe friends to accompany them on excursions.

Children with OCD often have feelings of claustrophobia, so please place them in larger classrooms if possible. Seat kids with OCD away from windows or doorways to avoid distraction, and in seats that provide an unobstructed view of the board. The room should provide easy movement, particularly if they need to leave the room to ritualise.

Some whole-class interventions are an effective means of addressing student anxiety, including OCD. Incorporating emotional learning into the curriculum can encourage students to express their emotions positively and ask for help when required (see Recognising and understanding feelings and emotions). Helping students to identify and name fearful emotions can help to gain control over them. Teachers can emphasise that everyone feels anxious from time to time, thus helping kids with OCD feel less abnormal.

While some children might use OCD as an excuse to avoid schoolwork, most prefer to do their work as best as they can. Therefore, maintain your expectations of all students, whilst keeping in mind the idiosyncratic nature of obsessions and compulsions.

Ignore the idiosyncratic behaviour of students with OCD that is not seriously disruptive. Set clear limits and establish consequences for behaviour. An agreed upon cue or signal made by the student could be used to alert teachers to situations the child has greater difficulty with.

Allow breaks during tests, or provide extra time, or allow students to submit tests or assignments orally.

Students need time to verbalise their worries if teachers are to gain a real perspective and understanding. Remember that most students with OCD are not intentionally deviant, and should not be punished for behaviour or situations over which they have limited or no control.

Reference: Woolcock, E., & Campbell, M.A. (2005). The role of teachers in the support of students with obsessive-compulsive disorder. *The Australian Educational and Developmental Psychology*, 22(2), 54-64.

# Autism Specific Strategies

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Each child is different, and different strategies will work for different children. Do not assume that strategies that have worked for some children with autism will work for all children with autism.

When trying to assist autistic children it is important to remember that these children take longer to adapt. They do not learn through observation like other children do. Whereas most children easily learn what is required of them through observation and experience, autistic children usually require specific instruction on what to do, how to behave, what is expected of them, etc.

Children on the autism spectrum are assisted by predictability. Teachers can increase predictability for students in a number of ways: through visual timetables, preparation for fire alarms drills, preparation for teacher substitutes, preparation for changes in routine, forewarning about loud noises.

Like any child, children on the autism spectrum are capable of manipulating a situation to get what they want. If they learn, that by resisting a request or situation, they can avoid it, then they'll likely repeat this behaviour. Teachers need to observe the child's behaviour and gain an understanding of when a child is just trying to get out of something, and when they are actually fearful. Manipulation and extreme reactions in an attempt to escape a situation can escalate very quickly, so it is important to gain an understanding of what is happening for the child before implementing interventions and strategies.

Children with autism may display more frustration and acting out behaviours which may stem from difficulties in self-expression. Helping children find appropriate ways to express their emotions and feelings may reduce such incidents.

It can be helpful to make a record of factors that trigger meltdowns and other extreme behaviour, as well as any warning signs that the child displays shortly before behavioural extremes. Once teachers are aware of the triggers and warning signs, strategies can be put in place to avert such occurrences.

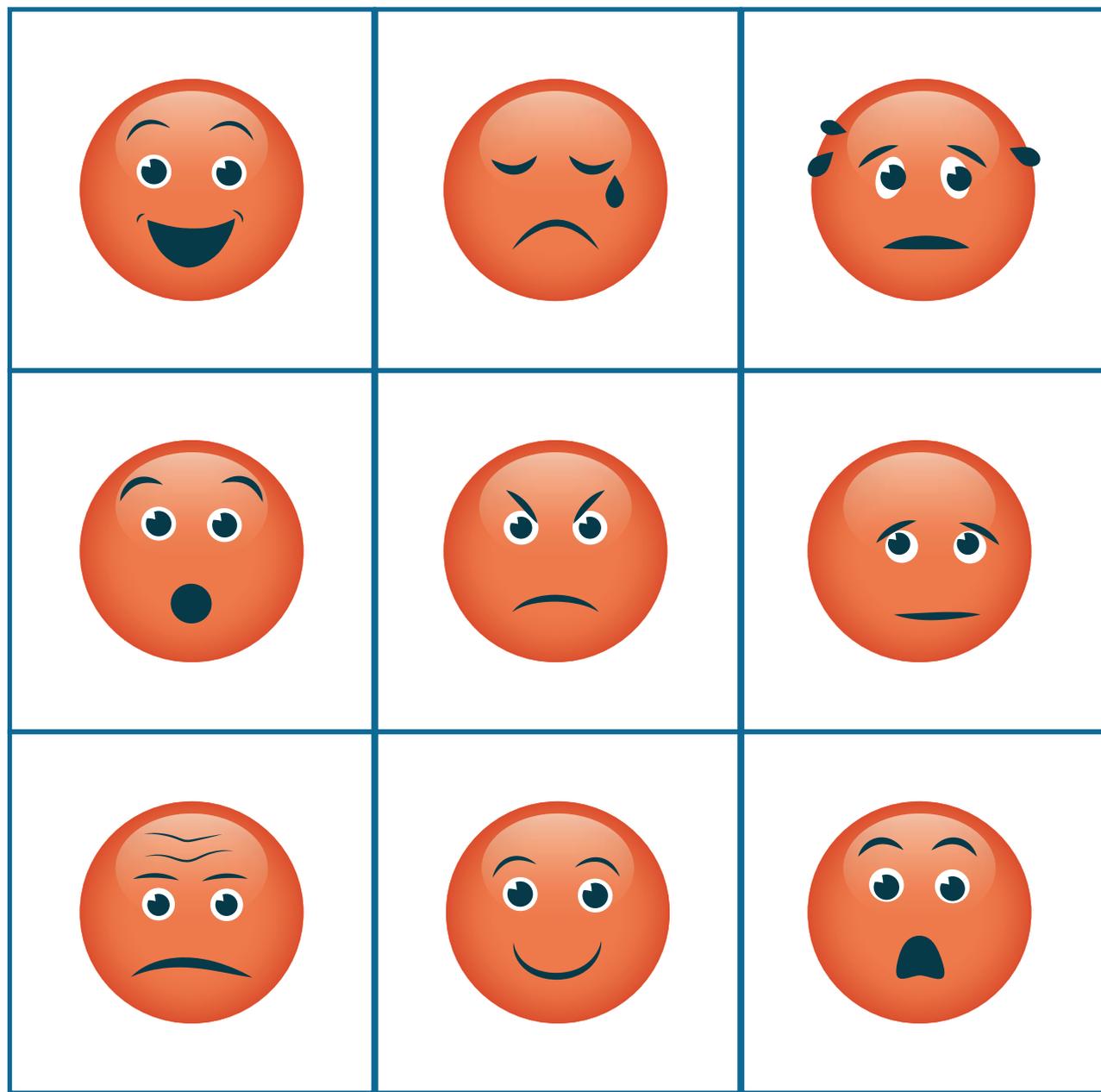
Teach children how to cope with situations that provoke high levels' of anxiety and/or meltdowns. This can be done by modelling for the child what they should do when they feel like this (e.g. going to teacher with a timeout card). The child will need to practise this when they are calm.

Reference: with thanks to Cassie le Fevre, Program Supervisor, Lizard Children's Centre, Chatswood.

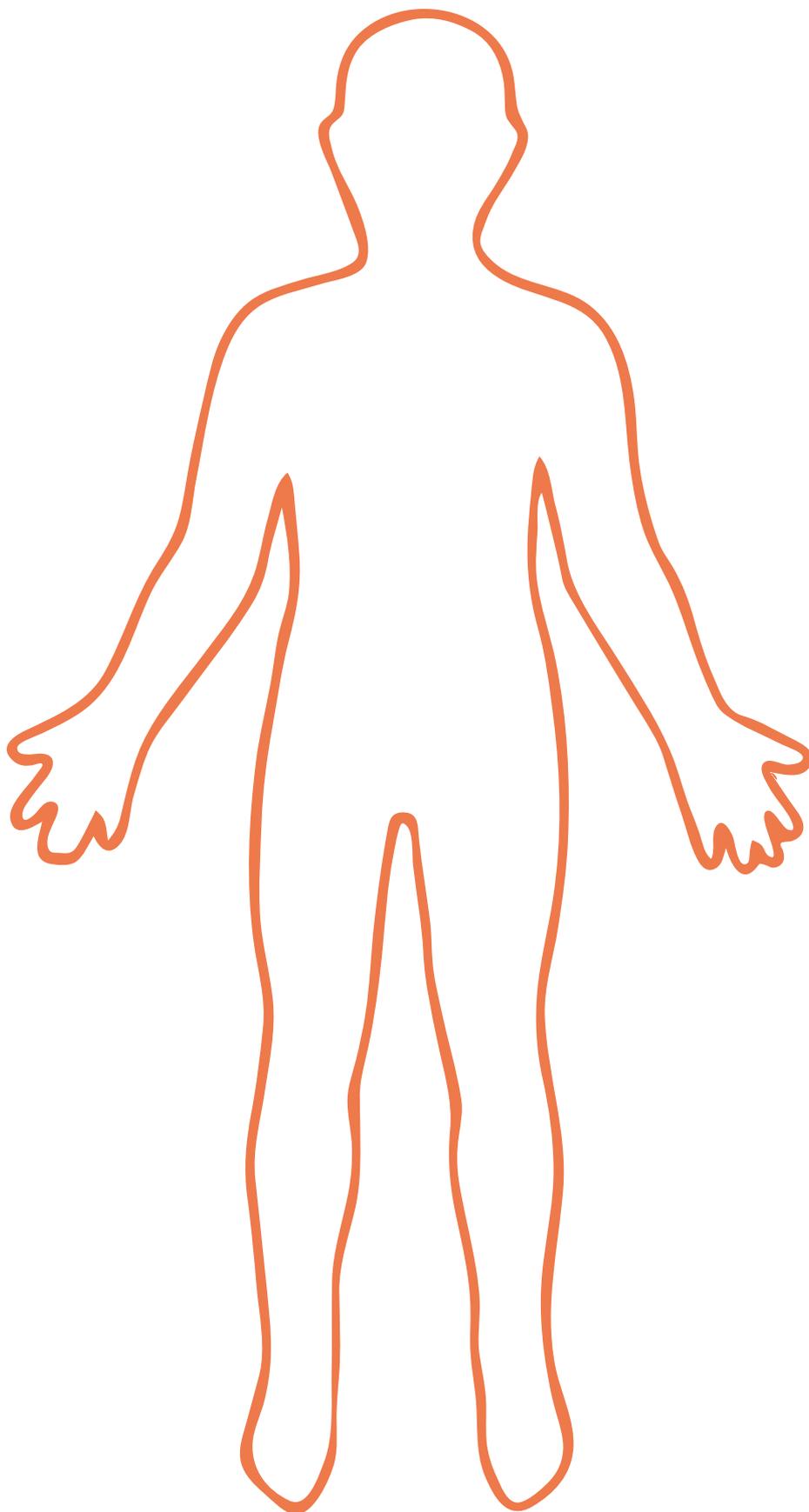
# Activity Supplement

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## IN THE CLASSROOM Activity 1



<b>EXCITED</b>	<b>SAD</b>	<b>NERVOUS</b>
<b>SURPRISE</b>	<b>ANGRY</b>	<b>SHY</b>
<b>WORRIED</b>	<b>HAPPY</b>	<b>SCARED</b>



## IN THE CLASSROOM Activity 2

### Coping with difficult feelings

#### Ideas about how we can help ourselves feel better:

- Asking a friend, teacher, or parent for help
- Reading a favourite book
- Doing a puzzle or other distracting activity
- Having a hug.
- Playing with a pet
- Playing with a favourite toy
- Having a warm drink
- Having a warm bath
- Going for a walk
- Listening to music, drawing....
- Cuddling a teddy
- Thinking of something to look forward to
- Slow breathing

## IN THE CLASSROOM Activity 4

### Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Sit comfortably, close your eyes and let your thoughts wash over you.

Now make your hands into fists, go on really squeeze those fists. Feel that tight feeling. Feel that tight feeling. And now relax/go floppy.

Think of that lovely feeling of relaxation (or think of that lovely floppy feeling for younger children.)

Make your hands into tight fists again and bring your hands up to touch your shoulders feel that tight feeling along your arms. Feel the tight feeling and relax, think of that lovely feeling of relaxation (or think of that lovely floppy feeling.)

Now relax your arms, let them hang loosely by your side. Push your shoulders up and try and touch your ears. Go on really push upwards. Feel that tight feeling in your shoulders. Feel the tight feeling and relax, think of that lovely feeling of relaxation (or think of that lovely floppy feeling)

This time scrunch up your face. Really scrunch up your face. Feel that tight feeling in your face and relax, think of that lovely feeling of relaxation (or think of that lovely floppy feeling).

Now make your tummy muscles tight go on really tighten those muscles. Feel that tight feeling. Feel the tight feeling and relax, think of that lovely feeling of relaxation (or think of that lovely floppy feeling.)

Push your tummy forward this time, make your back arch, feel the tight feeling all along your back, feel that tight feeling and relax, think of that wonderful feeling of relaxation.

Tighten the muscles in your legs, feel those muscles tightening, feel that tight feeling and relax. Feel that tight feeling along your arms. Feel the tight feeling and relax, think of that lovely feeling of relaxation (or think of that lovely floppy feeling.)

Now make your toes into fists, really scrunch up those toes. Feel that tight feeling. Feel the tight feeling and relax, think of that lovely feeling of relaxation (or think of that lovely floppy feeling.)

Take a deep breath hold that breath, feel that tight feeling in your lungs, feel the tight feeling now let the breath out slowly and feel all the tightness go away. Think of that lovely feeling of relaxation (or think of that lovely floppy feeling.)

Keep your eyes closed, we are going to check each part of your body to see if there is any tightness. Think of your hands and arms if there is any tightness just let go of it. Now check your shoulders, neck and face. If you find any tightness just let go. Check your back and shoulders, your legs and feet. If you find any tension just let go.

You should now be feeling wonderful and relaxed/floppy. Just enjoy that wonderful feeling and when you feel ready open your eyes.

Source: [www.educational-psychologist.co.uk/relax](http://www.educational-psychologist.co.uk/relax).

## Balloon Breathing Exercise

Have the child/children sit in comfortable chairs or lie down on the floor. Instruct them to take a deep breath in and hold it for 3 seconds, then exhale slowly. Breathe in counting to three and then out, counting to three. Repeat several times. When deep breathing, it's important to breathe with the diaphragm so you may like to tell children to place their hand on their tummy. When breathing in, their tummy should expand and then contract when breathing out. You can get them to pretend they have a balloon in their stomach which they are trying to fill with air and then try to push all the air out, so the balloon goes limp.

## Visual Imagery

### BEACH SCENARIO

Start with three deep breaths." Eyes should be closed.

"You are at the beach on a beautiful, warm, sunny day. You can feel the smooth sand between your toes. You are lying down on a soft, comfy blanket. You feel a gentle breeze blowing your hair and the warm sun on your face. You can hear the sound of the waves as they gently lap. You can smell the salty air. You can hear the seagulls calling in the distance. You look up and see the beautiful blue sky and the white fluffy clouds and you feel very peaceful, very relaxed and very content. Nothing matters but the warm sand (pause), the soft blanket under you (pause), the gentle breeze blowing your hair (pause), the feel of the warm sun on your face (pause), the sound of the waves (pause), the smell of the salt air (pause), the cry of the seagulls (pause), the blue sky (pause) and the white fluffy clouds. You feel peaceful, relaxed and content. If a thought crosses your mind or a worry comes up, you just let it float by you like the clouds float by in the bright blue sky.

Your head and neck are very, very relaxed. Your shoulders are very, very relaxed. Your hands and arms are very, very relaxed, they almost feel like spaghetti. Your stomach muscles are very, very relaxed. Your back muscles are very, very relaxed. Your feet and legs are very, very relaxed. You feel calm, relaxed and peaceful. I'm going to count to ten, and each time I say a number you will feel even more relaxed. (Pause after each number). One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. You are now completely calm, completely relaxed, completely at peace (finish with the three deep breaths.) Now stretch and slowly open your eyes whenever you are ready, but the feeling of relaxation and peace will stay with you. And you can get this relaxed feeling back whenever you want, just by taking three deep breaths.

Source: [www.smarterkids.com](http://www.smarterkids.com) (click on News and Reference, then Smarterparents .archive and go to relaxation tips.)