

Why is My Child Anxious?

Helping Children with an Intellectual Disability and Autism Manage their Anxiety

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is our body's natural response to stress. Anxiety can protect us from harm or threat (real or imagined) by preparing our body to respond to danger. Anxiety is feeling:

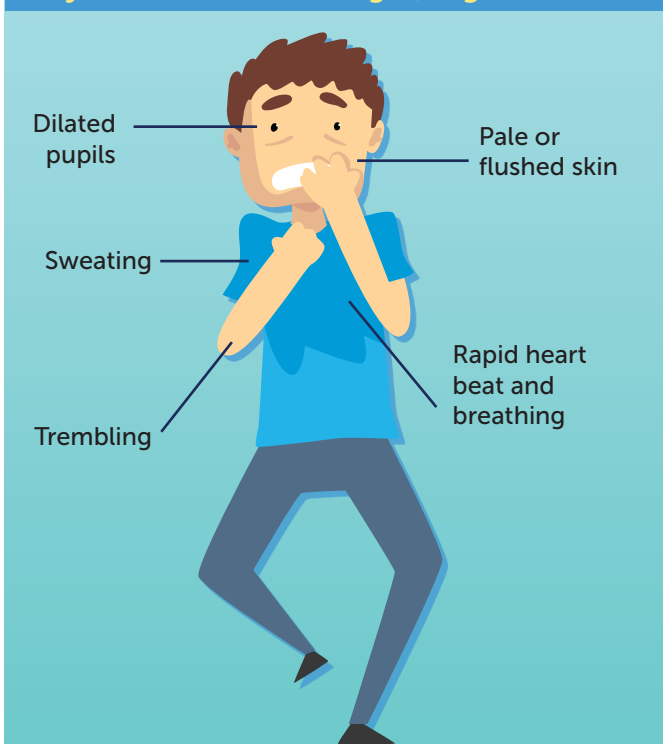
- *worried*
- *stressed*
- *scared*
- *nervous*
- *angry*
- *hopeless*

It is normal for a child to feel anxious sometimes. Autistic children and those with an intellectual disability tend to be more anxious.

When someone is anxious, they often worry about what *might* happen. When there is a lot of worry or it lasts for a long time, it can be a problem.

It is important for children to learn to manage their stress, fear and worries. Lots of worry can make it difficult for a child to be involved in daily tasks, enjoy themselves and try new things.

Physical Indications of Fight, Flight or Freeze



WHAT DOES ANXIETY LOOK LIKE?

Most children experience anxiety as changes in their body, the way they think and/or the way they feel. Children can find it difficult to recognise and tell others about what they are feeling.

Anxiety can feel like:

- *heart beating fast*
- *breathing more quickly*
- *feeling dizzy*
- *a sick stomach*
- *headaches*
- *sweating*
- *going to the toilet a lot*
- *having trouble getting to sleep and staying asleep*
- *sore or tight muscles*
- *not being able to sit still*



Parents and teachers may also be able to see when a child is feeling anxious by looking at changes in their mood or behaviour.

Anxiety can look like:

- *needing a routine*
- *constantly looking for danger*
- *not joining in with family and friends*
- *being easily upset by small things*
- *tantrums in younger children*
- *being angry or aggressive*
- *not concentrating*
- *intense focus on one thing*
- *not going to school or not doing schoolwork*
- *hurting themselves, such as scratching their skin*

WHY IS MY CHILD ANXIOUS?

Thinking about **why** your child might be anxious will help you choose the best way to respond. Some causes of anxiety and stress include:

- unexpected changes, e.g. to routine, to rules; an anticipated event being cancelled
- not feeling in control or knowing what to do
- not understanding what peers, teachers or family friends are trying to say
- feeling overwhelmed by what is happening around them
- not knowing how to make friends or play with other children

Lots of small worries and stress can make a child anxious. Stress is like water dripping into a bucket. There are many challenges and worries in a child's day. They all add water to the child's stress bucket.

We need to help the child empty water from the bucket regularly. If we don't, the water overflows, which can be seen as trouble with dealing with emotions and difficult behaviours.

What fills up your stress bucket?



What helps you let it out?

HOW CAN I HELP?

Letting water out of the stress bucket

Parents, teachers and other support staff need to talk together regularly so that they all know how to help the child both at home and at school. This will mean that everyone will work together to try new strategies for letting water out of their stress bucket and see how these new strategies work.

Here are some ideas to try:

- Taking slow, big breaths.
- Organise their day. Try and keep each day the same.
- Tell your child about any changes and make sure they know what will happen instead.
- Give your child time to understand information and ask questions.
- Use less words.
- Use pictures and gestures with your words.
- Give choices.
- Eat healthy and exercise.
- Find out what calms your child (e.g., their favourite toy).
- Spend time with your child.

It is important to deal with your own stress too. If you are doing well, this will lower your child's anxiety.

Go slow; be patient. Provide lots of support and show understanding. Allow your child time to prepare for new things, don't rush and talk to your child about what is hard for them. You can use pictures to help with this.

Encourage and praise. Encourage your child to try things. Praise even small steps to have a go.

Accept. Tell your child that it's ok to be worried and make some useful suggestions about what they could try to make themselves feel better.

CAN MEDICATION BE HELPFUL?

Every child is different. For some children, medication can help with reducing severe anxiety. This works by reducing the feeling of fear and nervousness and the physical response to these feelings within the child's body. Reducing a child's physical response to anxiety can create space to teach them new skills and ways of managing their anxiety.

WHEN AND WHERE TO GET MORE HELP

Be alert to the signs above, and if you are concerned, seek help and advice. If the anxiety is persistent and is stopping your child from participating in their regular activities, speak to your GP or Paediatrician about services that might be useful.

If you have any feedback on this tip sheet please fill in our [feedback form](#). You can find readings, resources and links related to this topic on our [webpage](#).

If you are still concerned, contact your GP or Paediatrician about services that might be helpful.

