

# Helping Children Manage Anxiety and New Beginnings

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# Aims

## → Understanding anxiety

Fight/Flight/Freeze response

What is physically going on in the brain and body

Separation anxiety / New Beginnings / Transitions

## → Strategies

To become more equipped and empowered with tools and strategies to regulate and relate to children when they are feeling anxious or struggling with a transition

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# Learning to Manage Anxiety

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We want to be able to take the anxiety away quickly because we love our child and don't want to see them in distress.

When our children experience anxiety, it gives us the opportunity to teach them how to manage when life is **hard**, when they face a **new change**, or when they need to **do something without us!**

We can show children that we can manage our tough feelings with **love, compassion and tenderness** for ourselves and others, and they can carry this with them for the rest of their lives.

Learning to manage anxiety and what is happening in our bodies when we are anxious is incredibly **empowering and resilience building** as many of us face inevitable anxiety in our lives.



The emotion driving anxiety is FEAR.

Fear may be present because of past difficult experiences, imagined consequences, low self esteem, low confidence.

When our brain perceives fear, it presumes we are in DANGER. The cave person part of our brain becomes activated and we go into survival mode.

# Fight / Flight / Freeze

This is a reflex from when we were cave people and needed to protect ourselves and our young from wild animals; to survive we either needed to **fight** the animal, **freeze** so that they didn't see us, or run away (**flight**) as fast as we could.

It is very strong and imprinted into our brains because it helped us survive as a species.



# Fight / Flight / Freeze

In order to be able to do this, our brain sends adrenaline surging through our body and we then experience the following sensations, which are all symptoms of anxiety.

Even though we aren't in physical danger, the body acts as if we are.

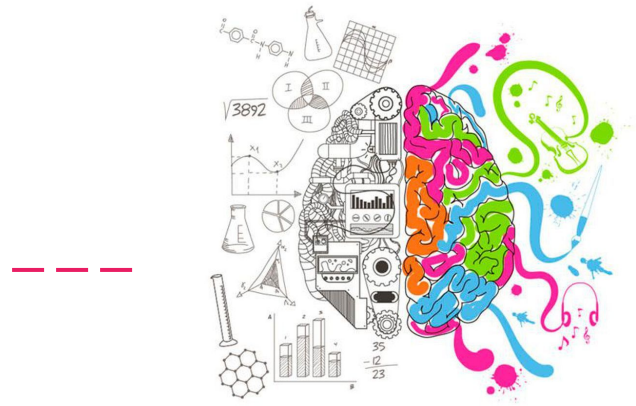
- Your heart pumps more blood around your body (so you have strength to fight or run away). This can cause **chest pains**, a feeling of it being **difficult to breathe normally** and a **raised heart rate**.
- Blood flows quickly to your legs and arms (to help you run/fight) - this can cause an unpleasant **tingly** or 'out of body' sensation
- You feel stuck but still revved up (as if you're 'freezing' but still alert)
- **Cold and sweaty** hands and feet (because of all the blood in our muscles)
- **Sweating**
- **Butterflies** in your **stomach**, stomach ache, nausea, diarrhoea, urinating (because blood is diverted away from the digestive system and into our muscles)
- Blood rushing around your body making your skin **blotchy**
- **Goose bumps**
- Feeling a sense of **dread**



# Fight / Flight / Freeze

What else happens?

- The 'logical left' side of our brain, the parts responsible for speaking and memory, the cognitive processing etc. all 'go offline' so our brain can focus on surviving the perceived danger.
- Therefore, it is really important with anxiety to remember that first things first, a child needs support with calming down their fight, flight or freeze response and telling the brain that there is no immediate danger.
- Then and only then, a child is able to think more clearly and the physical responses above ease off.

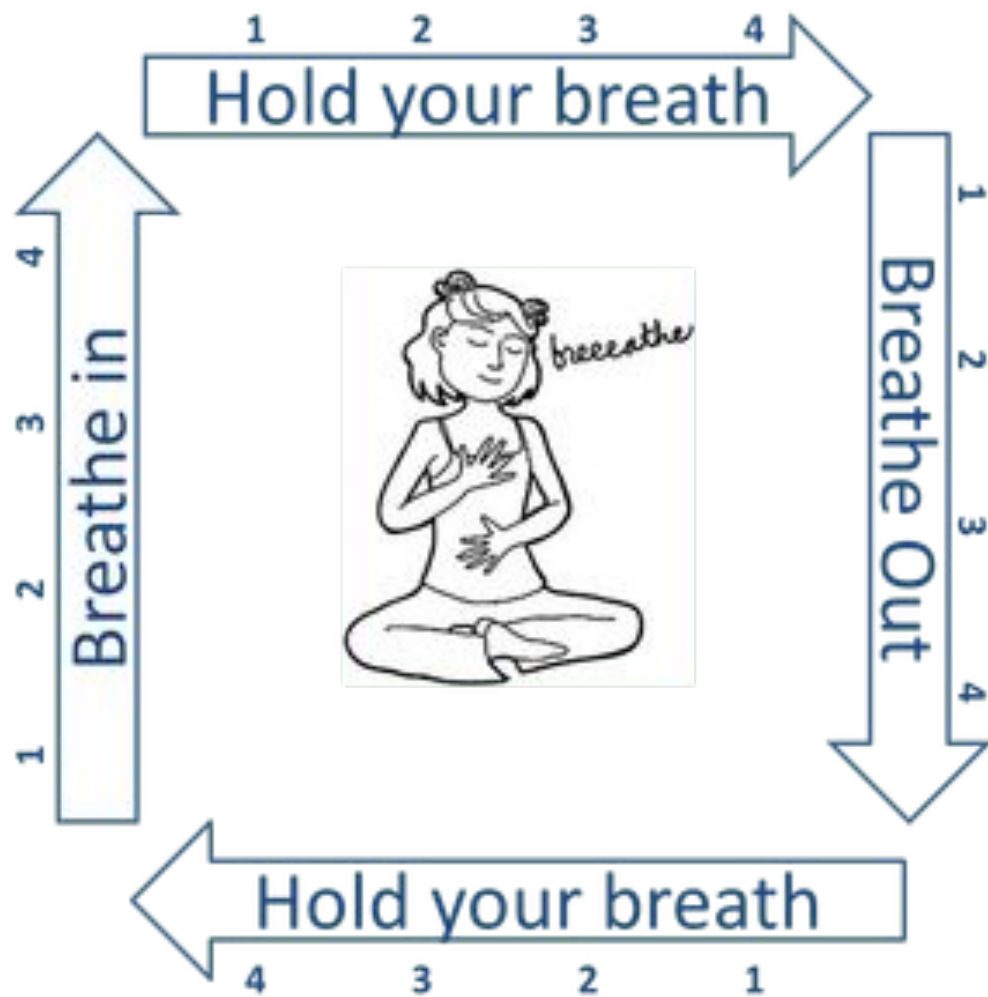


# Strategies for the initial calm down

To surge adrenaline around the body and cause an anxious response, we breathe in much more than we breathe out. Therefore, focusing on long exhales acts as a 'reset' button for the brain.







# Grounding Exercise



Name 5 things you can see



Name 4 things you can touch



Name 3 things you can hear

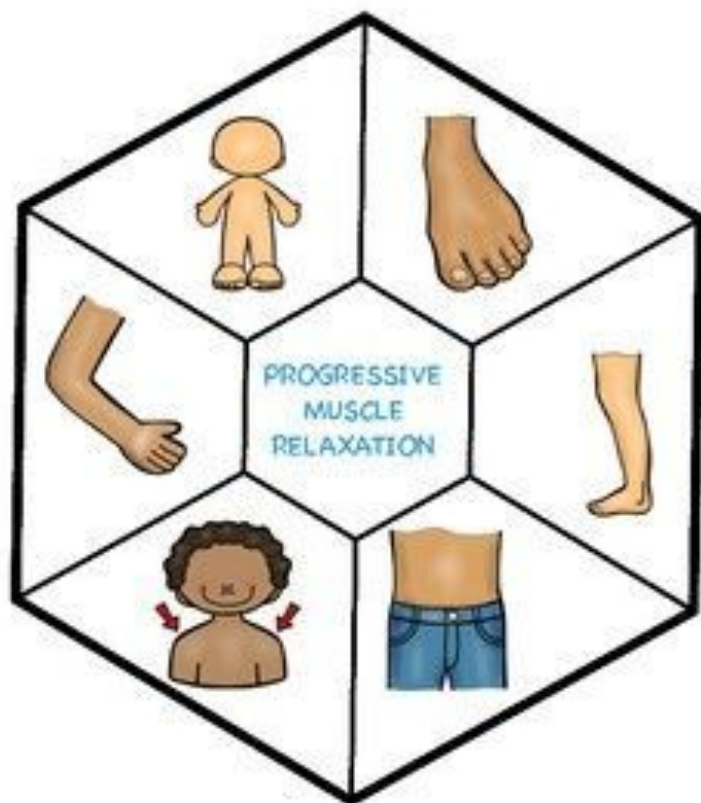


Name 2 things you can smell



Name 1 thing you can taste

SQUEEZE, COUNT TO 5, RELAX



# Talking through anxious feelings

## EMPATHY

- Feeling deeply understood
  - Naming emotions physically calms the brain's emotional processing down
  - Making guesses about what your child is deeply worried about will help build their emotional vocabulary, understanding and problem solving skills
  - Children need support with understanding how the world works and what would happen if their worst case scenario were to happen
  - Most anxieties are about belonging and safety. If we can reassure children that no situation or event affects how loved and safe they are then children can face challenges with more resilience and ability to manage the nerves and anxiety which come up.
  - Being empowered with the knowledge of their body responses helps to calm children down quicker but takes time, practice and patience.
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**Regulate. Relate. Reason.**

**Connect THEN Redirect**



# *Something to hold in mind...*

Being truly empathic not only means relating to others, but to ourselves... the parts of ourselves which have been overwhelmed, scared, lonely, out of control. Or, if we haven't or can't remember what it's like to feel what our child is feeling... then we relate to our capacity to feel that if we were in their situation...

— — — This can be really hard! (But, we need it!)

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# Other things we can say or do **instead** of “don’t worry”

Calming down the fight/flight/freeze response...

- Breathing
- Grounding
- Relaxing muscles

Empathy when flooded with emotions...

- “That sounds really hard”
- Just being there / cuddles
- “I’d feel like that too”
- “I know...”
- CONNECT then REDIRECT /  
Regulate. Relate. Reason.

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## Things we can say/ask

- I get scared too sometimes, especially when I am doing something new. But I don't stay scared forever.
- Can you tell me what you are most worried about?
- Can we paint/draw/make it?
- Can you show me what it feels/sounds like?
- What kind of weather does it feel like?
- What do you need from me? How can I help you?
- Big feelings are like the rain, they come and make us wet but they do go away and we dry out.

## Things we can do

- Take some big deep breaths together
- Have a comforting hot drink
- Just sit together and have a cuddle
- Kids don't say 'I've had a hard day, can we chat?', they say "Please can you play with me?" and this is how they best communicate their worries and hopes.
- Art work/drawing/colouring/play doh





















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# Zones of Regulation

This is used throughout the school to help children identify their emotions and what they may need.

Using this at home too may support them to express any anxieties which can then be dealt with in a familiar way.

Similarities between home and school can help ease transitions.

 <b>Blue</b> Rest Area	 <b>Green</b> Go	 <b>Yellow</b> Slow Down	 <b>Red</b> Stop
 Sad	 Happy	 Nervous	 Angry
 Upset	 Excited	 Surprised	 Yelling
 Hurt	 Calm	 Confused	 Aggressive
 Tired	 Proud	 Silly	 Mad

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# Transitions



# Tips and strategies for easing the transition

- **Visual timetables** for the school day and time at home - day by day and week by week. What will goodbyes look like?
- Model **talking enthusiastically** about what will be different (*having mass in church, roof top playground, play equipment, French, trips, art room, music room*) whilst also naming and acknowledging concerns/worries. Lots of space for any sense of loss.
- **Worry jar** - a place to put questions and uncertainties to externalise outside of the head/body
- Discuss your children's '**worst fears**' about change to alleviate any anxieties that can be.
- **Encourage questions**, but know that it is okay to say "I don't know" in response. You can offer **empathy** for how hard it is to not know something.
  - Make a book of questions with their answers so your child can revisit it rather than seeking constant reassurance from you (this builds self regulation and resilience).
- Having a **calm and measured** approach to the transition helps build resilience. **Resilience only builds in moments of tension!**
- Focus on building a sense of **inner trust** that we can manage or repair in times of uncertainty, rather than having all answers for any scenario.

# Separation Anxiety



# Tips and strategies for easing separation anxiety

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  - **Plan and practice goodbyes** as well as your reunions.
    - Let children know you're thinking of them
  - **Avoid colluding** with the anxiety that your child will not be okay without you.
    - Talk through your child's worst case scenarios - think about life jacket metaphors or resources they have 'in their pockets'.
  - **Tangible reminders of connection** - create them together as special quality time
  - 'The Invisible String', 'The Kissing Hand' **books**
  - Address behaviours in a **pro-active** way e.g. if you know they'll be anxious at bedtime, let them know you'll go in to check in on them before they need to ask. This shows your child they are held in mind.

# Other things to remember - anxiety/transitions

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- **Boundary consistency** is more important than ever in times of uncertainty. All feelings are understandable but we need to learn to express them in ways where no one (including self) gets hurt.

Communicate that boundaries are present because of how cared for your child is and how deserving they and others are of being kept safe from harm.

- **Brains not fully developed yet**

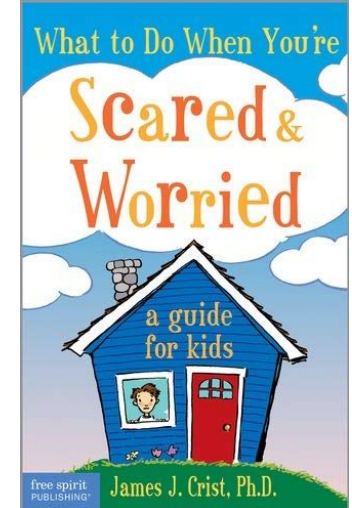
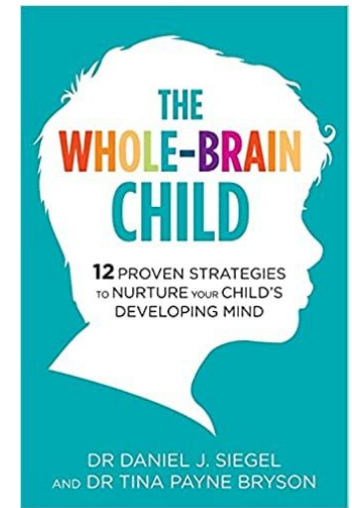
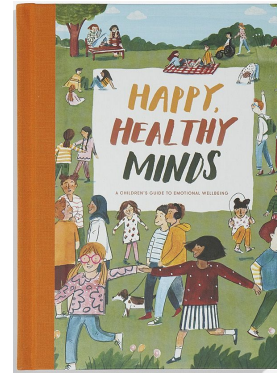
- 'Children **do as you do** not what you say' -actively model how you manage your feelings and avoid becoming overwhelmed. How will you focus on your 'pillars of health' (diet, sleep, exercise)?

- Time for **unhurried connection**

- Next week's session 'Emotional Education' - Weds 21st May 9am.

# Helpful resources

- Happy, Healthy Minds - The School of Life
- An Emotional Menagerie - The School of Life
  - A book of poetry for KS2 age children to help develop emotional vocabulary
- The Whole-Brain Child - Dr Daniel Siegel and Dr Tina Payne Bryson
- What To Do When You're Scared and Worried: A Guide for Kids - James J Christ
- Anxiety is Really Strange - Steve Haines
  - For parents to understand anxiety more, easy to digest comic strip style book
- YouTube video - 'The Triune Brain' as explained by kids
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVhWwciagOE>
- The Invisible String - Patrice Karst
  - For separation anxiety





# Helpful resources - Handouts on 'Pupil Wellbeing' section of our CTS school website

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Emotional Wellbeing Handout: Attachment, Play and Building Bonds



Emotional Wellbeing Handout: Bereavement



Emotional Wellbeing Handout: Encouraging Emotional Expression



Emotional Wellbeing Handout: Explaining Difficult Situations to Children



Emotional Wellbeing Handout: Managing Anxiety



Managing Anxiety and New Beginnings – Parent Coffee Morning September 2023



Separation Anxiety – Parent Coffee Morning January 2024



Emotional Wellbeing Handout: Self Harm and Suicidal Feelings



Emotional Wellbeing Handouts: Transition



**Questions?**

**Thank you!**