

Tips for Parents of Anxious Children

and for Anxious Parents

and for any parents of any children really.

Here are some faith filled ideas for dealing with anxiety when faced with new or emotionally demanding times & transitions.

CHURCH OF IRELAND
Children's Ministry
Incorporating Sunday School Society for Ireland and Children's Ministry Network

TIPS TO ENCOURAGE TALKING

1. **Fort Building / Under the Covers chats.** There's a science to this. Kids constructing their own spaces, feeling enclosed and safe, feeling a freedom as the space is different to the one full of rules and norms outside. There's an article about it here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/05/18/why-kids-love-building-forts-why-experts-say-they-might-need-them-more-than-ever/

   Provide all the materials the child needs. If they are younger you may need to help them build it, if they are older they may be happier to build it themselves. Ask permission to enter (maybe bearing the gift of a torch or a snack!) Once inside, there is opportunity to chat and listen without outside distractions.
   If you normally do a reflection or a family Bible study, perhaps the fort building can be the Bible study as it reminds us of God and the safety of being hidden in Him.



Psalm 18.2 **The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.**

2. **Spinning** – go for a drive and have a chat without eye contact. Some children find face to face sharing quite intense and off putting. Maybe your child will respond better when you are looking straight ahead while you talk.

3. **Doing / Making / Doodling / Building** – some children express themselves better if their hands are busy, if they are making something with you or beside you or if they are out in nature, taking a walk. The distraction with their hands clears any clutter in their minds and helps them say what's worrying them. So grab some playdough or do some scribble monsters or build some lego towers and have a chat.

4. **Telling Stories** – what scared you as a child? Children love to hear your stories and to know that they're not alone in their feelings when they are afraid or uncertain.

Tips to Encourage Listening

Sometimes when our children come to us with a problem or a worry we jump in and problem solve, or we tell our kids that there's no need to worry. But fixing the problem or dismissing their feelings may not be what they need.

1. Ask them - what do you want from me? To take Action, to give advice, or just to listen? 9 times out of 10, they just want us to listen.

2. From Barnados website – there are fantastic tips for Back to School here in the link. They really focus on worry and how it's felt in the body. https://www.barnardos.ie/tipsheets

Barnardos also highlights some books about worries which you could read with your child, which should be available in your local library:

"The Huge Bag of Worries" by Virginia Ironside

"Bad Day" by Ruby Roth

"Ruby's worry" by Tom Percival



Some questions to ask your child whilst reading together;

- What are some of the things that can worry you?
- What does worry feel like in your body?
- What can I do to help you when you are feeling worried?

In Children's and Family Ministry, we might add...

- Which of these worries can we take to God?
- Is God interested in them?
- What happens when you give your worries to God?

Or other simple open ended questions that allow your child to talk and you to listen.

Very simple techniques to show your child you're listening include:

making eye contact, asking them to expand or explain something they said, acknowledging the feelings or thoughts they express, repeating something back to them to show you have heard them.

Ways to be Deal with Anxious Energy, Racing thoughts & Big Feelings

Movement. *"As an adult I get anxious when leaving the house. Always have. I need the loo, I lose my keys, I get a bit irritated with the kids. I worry we'll forget something we need or, if it's somewhere new, that we'll get lost or won't find parking. One thing that really helps me is to stretch and shake out the nervous energy as dramatically and loudly as possible. It makes me laugh, it calms me down, it puts me into the moment where I realise it's ok if we forget things or are 5 minutes late or need to circle around a few times before we park. And my kids think it's hilarious so instead of being snapped at, they're laughing too. You can do this for your child OR you can model acknowledging your stress and then dealing with your stress. (Disclaimer: Sometimes I forget to do this because I'm stressed!...and human.)"* Lydia, Sunday School Society for Ireland

Other movements can involve wall press ups, jumping jacks and tensing all your muscles and then releasing them. You can make it into a game where you do short bursts of intense movement at different times throughout the day – maybe even sound a horn!

Worry Prayers – You can pop bubble wrap or burst bubbles for these sensory prayers:



Sensory Bottles



There are lots of sensory bottle or 'calming jar' tutorials online. Here's one: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7zp7KbxbKY The objects in the jar represent your racing thoughts. Shake up the bottle, focus on everything swirling and then settling and imagine your thoughts slowly quietening down. Tell the story of Jesus calming the storm. Ask Jesus to speak to your mind and the anxiety racing around your body. Practise saying 'Peace be still.' Thank God that He is in control.



Journaling.

"I don't enjoy the thought of journaling, however, it is the most effective way for me to deal with my anxiety, especially when my anxiety disrupts my sleep. I write down what's worrying me – all that worst case scenario thinking, all those 'not good enough' thoughts and the anger that comes with feeling I should be coping. When I'm all done, the most important bit is writing something kind about myself at the end. When we're anxious, we're in survival mode and we're judging and boy, are we self-judging. Parents, don't just offer this to your child, try it for yourself too." Lydia, Sunday School Society for Ireland

There are lots of different ways to journal:

Write or draw worries, and then rip up the page and throw it out. This can bring release.

Journaling can be done more prayerfully with a pocket cross or a cross you make from objects in your home. Both you and your child can write or draw your worries and put them at the foot of the cross or pin them onto the cross as a sign you are giving your worries to Jesus. If you have someone who is nifty in DIY you can always nail your worries to the cross!

Children can have a worry journal and write and/or draw in it daily. Note, it can take 4 or 5 days before you see the benefit of this. Again, for younger children, colours can signify different feelings one day and pictures can be drawn another day.

If your child is particularly anxious you can set aside 10 minutes to worry every day together and at the end of the daily session, you can drop the journal with all the worries into a sealed box. This helps a child understand that their worries are valid but don't have to steal joy from other parts of their day.

Ways to be ground yourself when together....



Breathing:
Breathing techniques are tried and tested ways to break the cycle of adrenaline coursing through your body when you start to feel anxious. They can be fun and creative and part of your daily routine. This one is from Children's Ministry Network rep Lynn Storey.

Laughter is a great release for stress. What makes your child laugh? Being chased by the tickle monster? Watching funny videos? Reading funny stories? Making faces? Whatever it is, make time for it together.

Music brings a unique lifting of spirits. Every child will be different – some may like soothing music and others will prefer belters they can sing along to. Why not make an anxiety play list? You can include some of their favourites from Sunday Club such as

...and when apart

When we're anxious, we're not in the moment. Here's a breathing exercise that your child can do when they are not with you, that helps them focus on the now:

Star Breathing:



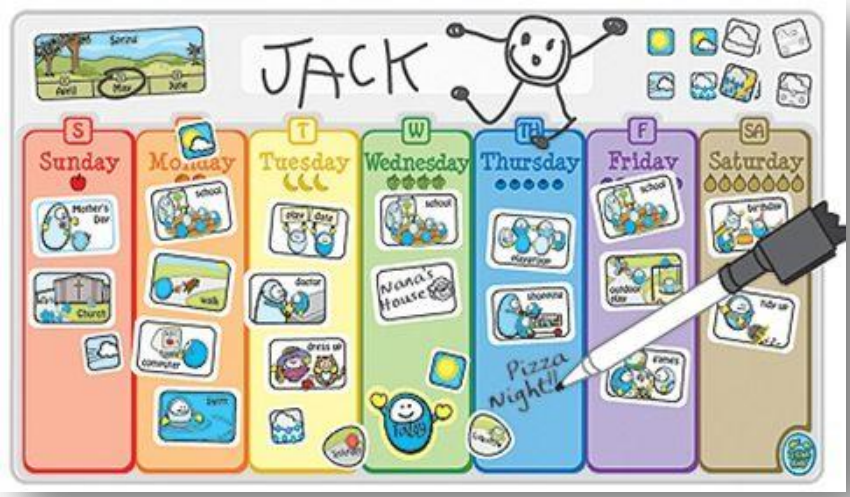
Stretch your fingers out like a star. Using the pointing finger of your other hand trace along your star stretched fingers. Breathe in as you trace up to the tip, hold and then breathe out as you trace down to the palm. Keep going until you have traced all 5 fingers.

Do this exercise as many times as you need to. Remind yourself that God holds you in the palm of His hand.

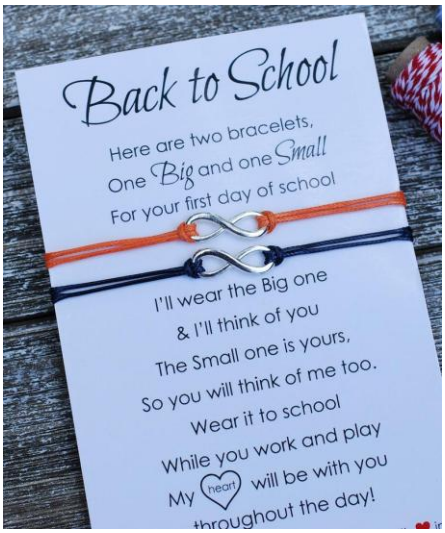
Body Grounding – our bodies can hold anxiety. Practise planting your feet firmly on the ground, sitting up straight, feeling your hands on your lap and lifting your head up high. These simple acts force you to notice your body, to be present and to lift yourself up. 'He puts my feet on solid ground, Psalm 40:2...He is the lifter of my head' Psalm 3:3 You can practise this at the kitchen table or out in the park with your bare feet in the grass.

Tips for Reassurance

Visuals: Many schools and pre-schools already do this, but if not, why not request it for your child? Ask for pictures of what their new school will be like. This is where you take your shoes off, this is where you hang your coat and bag, you bring your lunchbox in here, the classroom looks like this, your desk looks like this, your teacher looks like this, the toilets are in here. Many people find these help with conversations during school term too because children can point to the pictures and tell stories of what happened in that place. As you point to each picture remind your child that Jesus is with you here, Jesus is going before you here, He has your back, He is you giving you strength.



You can also have visuals for your routine at home, such as a calendar on the fridge which may help children who are struggling to adjust to new routines.



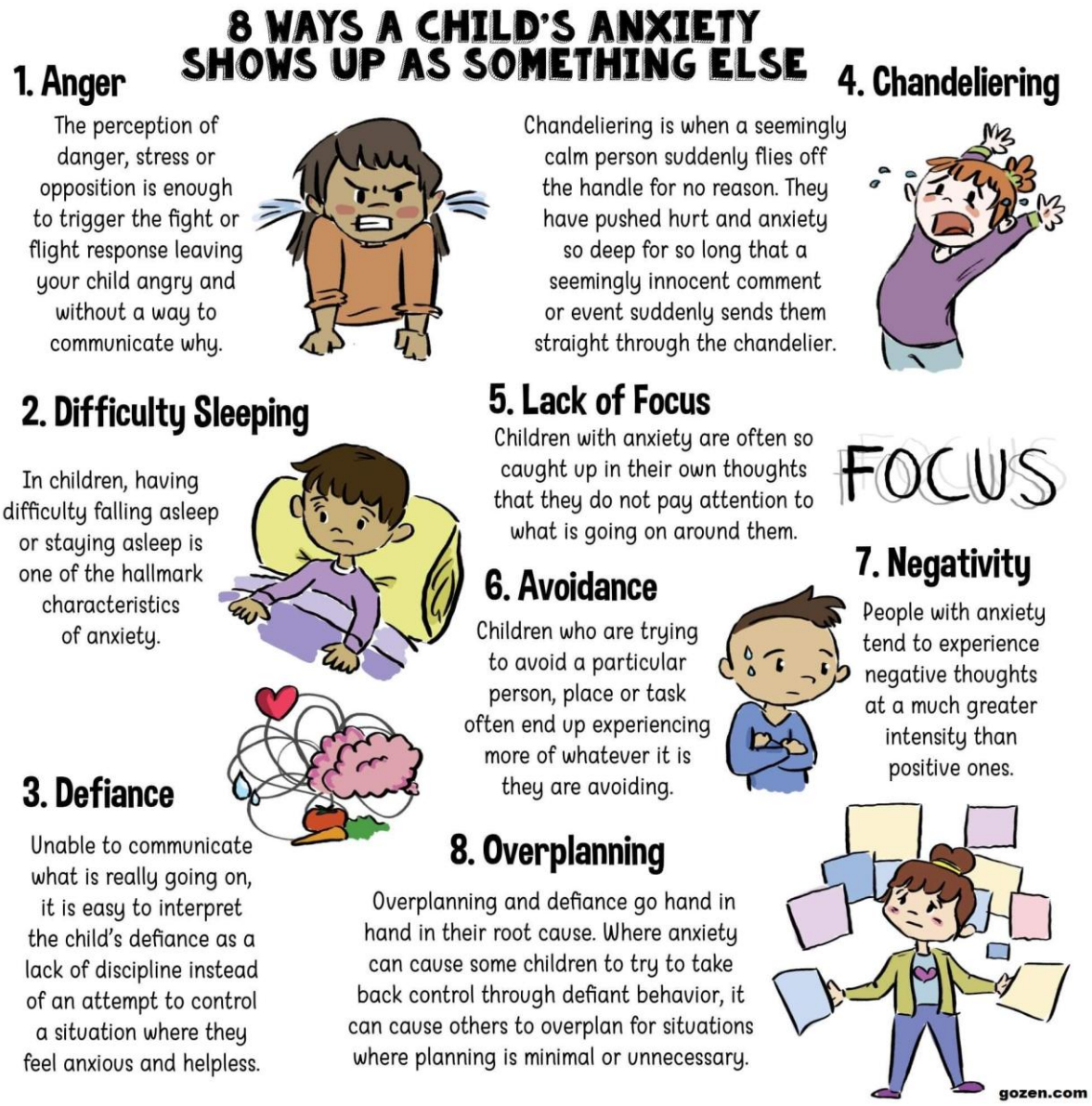
Comfort /Separation Bracelet: we're unsure if this will be appropriate in school if it is visible and jewellery is not allowed but we are sharing in case it will work in your context.

You can make them and use three strands of wool/thread woven together to remind your child that as they work and play, you are praying for them, and united together in God's love. Amazing!

Together at Home have a great activity sheet for preparing children to go back to school – find it here https://af51dd98-adab-4c43-ba03-c87e019551a5.filesusr.com/ugd/ebdd71_f339ff4387304aecba112bfb980a3a95.pdf

Or what about a **Heart button** sewn inside their trouser pocket? When your child puts their hand in their pocket, they're reminded that you love them, that you're praying for them and that God is with them.





As adults we behave in these ways too. Being kind and curious about out of character behaviour applies to how we treat ourselves as much as how we treat others. Why not draw your feelings with your child – there's a nifty template here: https://www.barnardos.ie/media/8669/draw-your-own-feelings-card-template.pdf Then remind yourselves of how God sees you and how that doesn't change no matter how you're feeling or behaving.