



Helping your child

Fear and anxiety

It's normal for children to feel anxious, worried or fearful after an injury, illness, medical procedure or time in hospital. These feelings usually occur in the first few weeks and settle down when life starts getting back to normal. However, sometimes these feelings don't go away, and even increase over time. Fear and anxiety can stop a child from doing things they want or need to do. It's important for caregivers to be aware of the signs of anxiety and know how to help their child learn coping strategies.

Signs of anxiety

Thoughts: anxious thoughts and worries, difficulty concentrating, confusion.

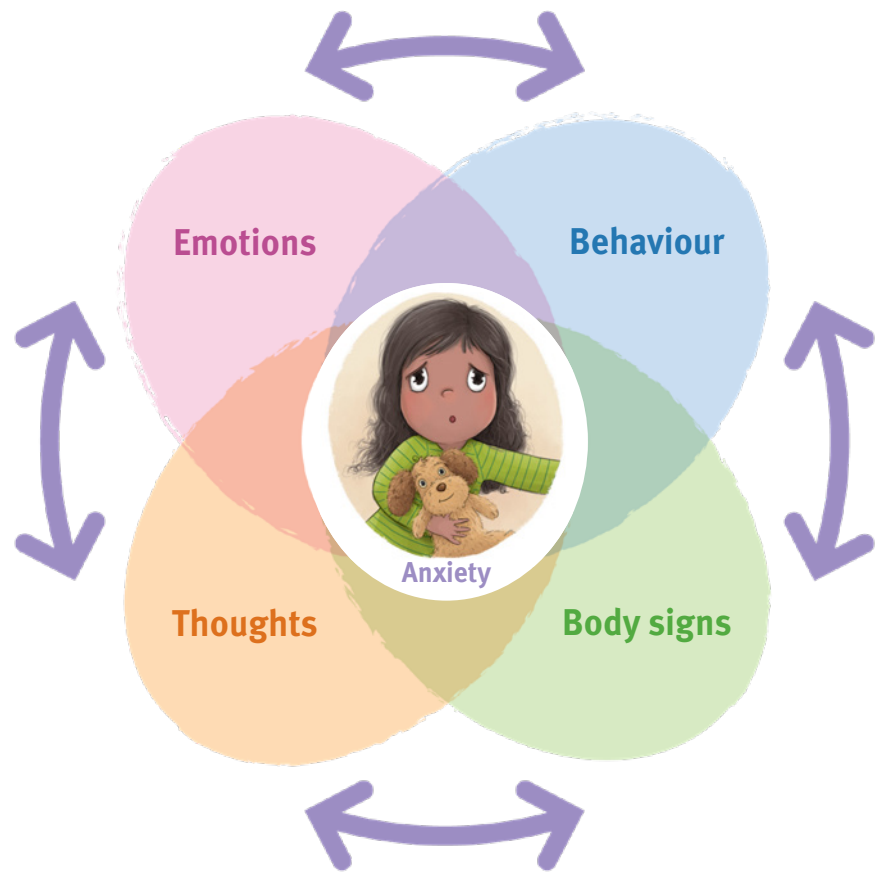
Emotions: fearful, scared, worried, irritable, angry, sad, withdrawn.

Body signs: racing heart, sweating, shaking, headaches, tummy aches, flushed, tense muscles, appetite changes, sleep difficulties.

Behaviour: avoidance of fears, separation distress, seeking constant reassurance or physical comfort, aggression, tantrums and meltdowns, developmental regression.

Why have these feelings started or increased?

After a medical event, a young child's sense of safety and security may be threatened. They may have also experienced feelings of helplessness and loss of control. For example, during new and sometimes invasive medical procedures, separation from caregivers or being away from their usual safe and familiar space. They may be worried about the medical event happening again, or ongoing medical treatment. Routines or expectations may have changed. It's very common for caregivers who have seen their child go through a difficult experience to become more lenient in their parenting, be more protective of their child, or respond to anxious behaviours in a different way.



Five key support areas

There are five key areas you can focus on to support your child to overcome fear and anxiety. This includes focusing on ways you can strengthen connection in their important relationships, re-establishing family routines and expectations, helping your child to identify and communicate their emotions, teaching positive coping strategies and seeking extra support.





Connection: Strengthen relationships to help your child feel safe, secure and loved

This is the most important area that caregivers can focus on to protect their child's mental health and wellbeing. A positive, consistent, nurturing connection supports children's emotional resilience, helps them cope during stressful times, and will reduce the likelihood that anxiety will continue over time. You can strengthen relationships by:

- responding warmly and consistently when your child seeks your attention or expresses a need.
- finding chances to connect throughout the day, even if you only have 5 minutes.
- giving lots of physical comfort in the way your child enjoys and feels comfortable with (e.g. hugs, kisses, hand holding, massage, pat on the back, high five).
- spending special time together including exploration, play and quiet time (e.g. reading books, singing nursery rhymes, doing craft, watching a movie).
- incorporating special time into your routine helps your child know what to expect and gives them something to look forward to.
- engaging in fun activities regularly as a family (e.g. exploring nature, board games, walking the dog).
- providing extra support and connection at bedtime, before and after time apart, and during times of stress.



Routine: Maintain or create family routines and clear expectations

'Soft routines' (not rigid, but reasonably predictable) are particularly important for children and adults during stressful times. Children feel safer, more secure and cope best when:

- caregivers encourage regular healthy routines that include good-quality sleep, eating well, physical activity, play and family rituals.
- the order of daily activities is fairly consistent.
- there are clear rules and expectations for behaviour.
- routines are flexible when circumstances change.
- children are prepared for transitions or separations.

When children are in hospital or recovering from sickness or injury, it can be hard to stick with established routines or set up new ones.

It's okay to adjust or simplify the usual routine during this time.

Return to normal family routines when possible.

Scan the QR code at the end of this document to access recommended resources online for more detailed information about how to create routines for different ages.





Identify emotions: Help your child to name their feelings

Pay attention to when your child is showing anxious behaviours and think about what might be causing them. When your child is anxious or fearful, stay calm and describe the feelings you are observing (this is important even for babies). Validate their feelings and let them know it's okay to feel scared or worried. Avoid the temptation to try to 'fix' or 'distract' from the uncomfortable feelings immediately.

Teaching children to recognise and name feelings can help them build emotional literacy skills, identify body cues, communicate their feelings and needs to others, and learn how to remain calm. Try feelings cards to help your child learn names for different emotions (try the free [Frankie's feelings cards](#) or [poster](#)) or read children's books about feelings (see our recommended list of books about [Anxiety and other emotions](#)).

Talk with your child about how anxiety might feel and look in their body (e.g. butterflies in their tummy, sweaty palms, feeling irritable, blushing).

If they are old enough, encourage them to talk with you if they notice these body cues. Praise your child when they are able to name and talk about their feelings.



Targeted strategies: Teach your child skills to help them cope with emotional distress and encourage positive behaviour

Teach your child emotion regulation strategies

Young children learn emotion regulation (i.e. the ability to understand and manage feelings in an effective way) through their relationships with caregivers and modelling behaviours they observe from adults around them. They need to be taught and shown different skills and techniques so they can build their own toolbox of coping strategies for managing complex emotions.

Regularly provide opportunities for your child to learn and practice different emotion regulation strategies. The [Relaxation and mindfulness strategies](#) tipsheet provides information about how to introduce and practice relaxation and mindfulness and provides links to child-friendly activities.

Check out the [Frankie coping cards](#) and [poster](#) for some helpful ideas for dealing with big feelings. Encourage your child to come up with their own coping strategies, "What would help you feel better right now?", "What usually helps you calm down?", "Let's look at Frankie's coping poster for some ideas".

Be aware of what you are modelling to your child when you are feeling anxious, stressed or overwhelmed. Children have an amazing 'radar' for their caregivers' emotions and how they cope with them. Name your own feelings and show your child in words and actions how you cope when you feel anxious or scared (e.g. "I feel a bit nervous. I'm going to do some deep breathing to help me stay calm!").





Targeted strategies: Teach your child skills to help them cope with emotional distress and encourage positive behaviour

Help your child with feared situations

Model brave behaviour. You may be feeling nervous, worried or anxious yourself. Show your child that instead of avoiding scary or distressing things, sometimes it's important to face them with courage.

Instead of avoiding feared situations, see if there are ways to modify them so they're more tolerable for you and your child. Your child's treating professionals may be able to help. If your child is feeling anxious about medical procedures, try the resources recommended in the [Medical procedure preparation](#).

Using a favourite toy as a comfort companion may help your child feel brave or give comfort when they need to do something that makes them anxious.

Break down scary situations into little steps and help the child face them bit by bit (e.g. scared of needles: Look at pictures of needles together, play doctors and give teddy a needle, play doctors and pretend to give your child a needle, etc). Following a 'stepladder approach' is an effective way to support your child to gently face their fears in a gradual step-by-step way. For more guidance, scan the QR code below.

Praise your child for successfully facing scary situations and reward brave behaviour with rewards they value (e.g. stickers, small toy or book, treats, smiles, praise and cuddles).



Seek extra support: Sometimes no matter how well parents support their child, professional advice is needed to help

You know your child best. If you're concerned, you can seek advice from your child's health care team, early childcare educator or teacher, GP or paediatrician, child health nurse or community health centre, community mental health service, or a specialist mental health professional (e.g. psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, occupational therapists).

For further support, visit [Frankie's Clubhouse](#) or scan the QR code for our recommended list of resources for anxiety and procedural anxiety.



Your child might need extra help if their symptoms are:

- continuing or getting worse
- different to their normal behaviour or uncommon for their age (e.g. temper tantrums)
- impacting their medical care
- affecting their daily activities (e.g. playing, having a shower or bath, sleeping and eating, going to daycare, kindy or school).
- affecting their relationship with you or others (siblings, family, friends etc).