

EASE at Home (Grades K-3)

Strategies to help young children cope with anxiety

Sometimes it's hard for adults to know what to say or do to ease a child's worries, especially during times of change and uncertainty. As the most important big people in their world, parents and caregivers can help children feel safer and soften the sharp edges of whatever is happening to make their worries grow.

Creating Rhythms and Routines

What is it?

When the world feels upside down, following a schedule that includes some calming routines can help create a sense of order. Routines don't have to be elaborate and can include small acts that create moments of connection and comfort for your child.

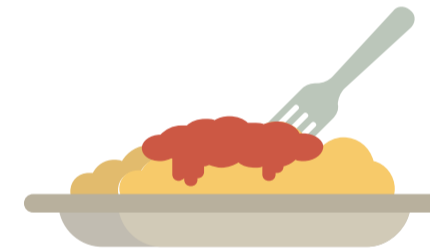
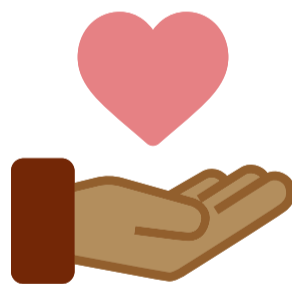
How?

Involve your child in creating a [daily schedule](#) that works for your family. Make sure to include time for fun, creativity, and quiet time. With younger children, map out the day using pictures or drawings. Establish some new routines or revisit old favourites. Examples include:



Have a five-minute morning snuggle to discuss dreams from the night before

Before eating dinner, ask everyone to share one thing they're grateful for or one thing they learned that day



Have a certain meal on a certain night, like Taco Tuesdays or Spaghetti Sundays



Light a candle and play some soothing music during bath time

Sing the same song every night at bedtime



Hint: Having regular reminders of what's coming next will help minimize upsets when it's time to transition from one thing to the next.



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Learning About Worries

What is it?

There are many ways our bodies and minds react to feeling worried and uncertain. It can help us to feel better knowing that feeling worried and anxious is normal, temporary and even helpful in some situations. Although anxiety is uncomfortable, it is not dangerous and there are many things we can do to calm ourselves.

How?

Read picture books, share stories or watch videos about feeling worried and ask your child if they are having any of the same feelings. Some examples include:



[The Huge Bag of Worries](#)

by Virginia Ironside

[A Big Hug Book: Worries Are Like Clouds](#)

by Shona Innes

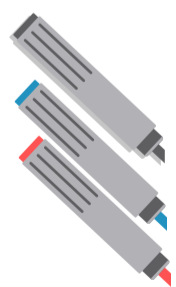


[Is A Worry Worrying You](#)

by Ferida Wolff & Harriet May Savitz

[Anxiety In Kids](#)

by Willa, Kid Scientist & Australian Museum



Provide an opportunity for your child to create their own worry character using materials from around the house such as markers, rocks, magazine pictures, or playdough. Talk with your child and ask questions about the worry character's size, color and shape, when and why they think the worry character shows up.

Hint: Let your child know that everyone has worries from time to time. Talk about some of your small worries. Emphasize that worries come and go like clouds in the sky.



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Body Awareness

What is it?

Worried feelings can show up in many ways in our bodies. For example, children may experience a racing heart, hot face and tense muscles when they feel scared or worried. Being aware of the different ways our bodies respond to feelings of worry can make these feelings less frightening and help us make sense of what we are experiencing.

How?

Read books or share stories about the different ways our bodies react when we experience worried feelings. Ask if your child has ever felt some of the same sensations. Some examples include:

When I Am Worried

by Michael Gordon

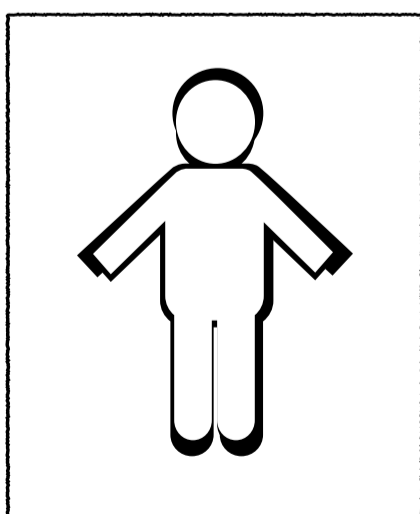
Hey Warrior

by Karen Young

Listening to My Body

by Gabi Garcia

Notice and ask questions about how your child physically reacts to different situations. It can be easier to talk about how their body is responding rather than talking about the feelings. *"I see your arms are crossed really hard across your chest after you missed the net. I wonder what your arms/body are telling you about how you are feeling?"* (activity adapted from [Heart-Mind Online](#))



Discuss a time when your child did something that created worry for them. How did their body feel? Together, outline your child's body on paper and talk about where in the body they experience worry.

They can draw or also paste magazine pictures to show some of the body reactions they experience. Use fun symbols to show different experiences like drums beating near the head for a headache.



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Helping Children Find Their Feelings

What is it?

Younger children may have a hard time identifying the intense and confusing feelings that come with all the changes in their world. They may be frustrated about having to stay home all the time, disappointed that activities are cancelled, and worried about the news. Parents and caregivers can help them learn to recognize their emotions and find ways to express them, so they don't stay bottled up inside or get acted out in unsafe ways.

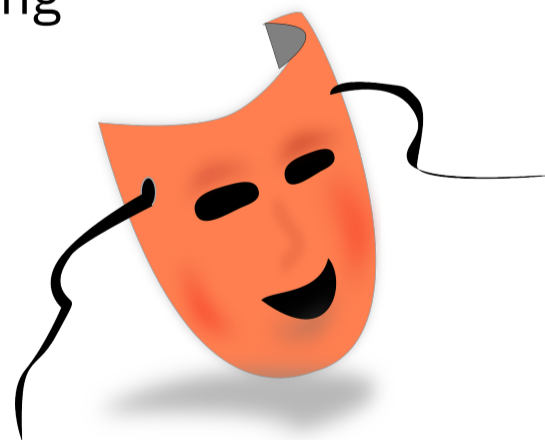
How?

Read picture books or watch videos about different emotions and ask if your child is having any of the same feelings. Examples include:

In My Heart

by Jo Witek

Play a feelings charade game by taking turns acting out different feelings and guessing what they are. Afterwards, invite your child to talk about the feelings they've been having lately.



The Feelings Book

by Tod Parr

Invite your child to find ways to express their feelings through drawing and painting, imaginative play, dancing, ripping up paper, banging on drums or pots, and even having a good cry.



The Feelings Song

by Miss Molly

Hint: Acknowledge all the feelings your child experiences. Be present and supportive without trying to fix or change how they feel. For example, 'I'm guessing you're feeling so frustrated that you can't play with Alex. It's so hard not being able to see your friends. I bet you really miss him.' or 'Feeling a little nervous now is a sign your emotions are working as they should.'



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Worry Scale

What is it?

The *Worry Scale* is a way to measure the strength of our feelings and understand that anxious feelings can vary from mild to strong. The scale can help children check in with themselves and recognize the amount of anxiety they are feeling, and when they may need support from a parent or caregiver to help them feel better.

How?

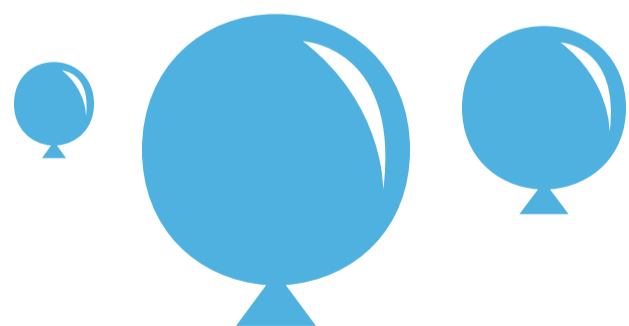
Help your child visualize the 'size' of their worries. Ask them to show how small or big their worry might be in different situations, such as the first day of school or going to the dentist, by using the activities below.

Read books or share stories and ask your child what they do when their worries get too big. Some examples include:

Don't Feed The WorryBug

by Andi Green

Talk with your child about all of their different worries. Invite them to blow up a balloon (or you can do so) to a size that represents each worry.



How Big Are Your Worries Little Bear?

by Jayneen Sanders

Brainstorm with your child what they could do to help shift their worries from feeling big to medium or small.



Ideas might include: a cultural practice, listening to music, or thinking about a favourite person or pet.



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Relaxation Skills: Calm Breathing

What is it?

Children are usually not aware that worries and other difficult emotions can 'show up' in their bodies as physical discomfort, like tummy aches, headaches, and muscle tension. Regularly practising fun relaxation exercises can help bodies and minds feel loose and calm and dial down stress and worries when they do arise.

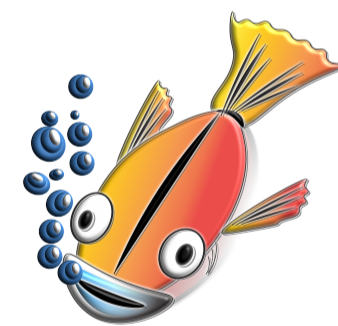
How?

Practicing slow, deep breathing is one of the most effective ways to feel relaxed, centred, and focused. Encourage children to breathe slowly in through the nose, allowing the belly rise, hold for a few seconds, then slowly exhale through the mouth, causing the belly to fall. Repeat the cycle 3-5 times to start and build up to 10 times for a more powerful calming effect. Add some fun by trying the following:



Imagine smelling a flower while breathing in slowly, then pretend to blow out birthday candles while gently breathing out

Blow real or imaginary bubbles, breathing in deeply and gently breathing out to make the biggest bubble possible



Follow along with a short video like this [bubble breathing fish](#) or try [Belly Breathing with Elmo](#)

Hint: Calm breathing is best practiced regularly and when your child is already calm so they can remember how to do it when they feel upset. Learn to identify your child's triggers so you can do some calm breathing together before things get out of hand. It's always easier to deal with strong emotions before they get too overwhelming.



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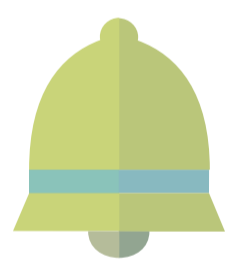
Relaxation Skills: Being Mindful

What is it?

Paying attention to the present moment with an open, curious mind, also known as mindfulness, can help children understand the different ways our bodies can react when we experience feelings of anxiety. To learn more about mindfulness, visit [Heart-Mind Online](#) and [Mindful.org](#).

How?

Parents and caregivers can help children be mindful by focussing on the present moment. Learning mindfulness can take some practice. It can be done by taking time to be still for periods of time throughout the day. Encourage your child to relax in a chair or lie down on their back on a comfortable surface and close their eyes, if comfortable doing so.



Take one slow, deep breath together. Ring a bell or use a chime sound on a phone app (e.g. Insight Timer) and ask your child to focus all of their attention on the sound, until it can no longer be heard (slowly reduce the volume if using a phone app).


Ask your child to put their hand on their tummy and take a few slow deep breaths.


Repeat.

Ask your child to answer the following questions quietly in their head, allowing time in between each question.

 What is one thing you **hear**?

 What is one thing you **see**?

 What is one thing you **feel**?

 What is one thing you **smell**?

Take one slow breath together and ask your child what the experience was like. Using their senses to notice things around them, requires being fully present in the moment.



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Relaxation Skills: Tense & Relax

What is it?

When kids and adults feel worried, they tense up physically. This muscle tension can feel uncomfortable and contribute to general feelings of unease. Tense & Relax involves children learning to tense up, hold, and completely relax each muscle group, one at a time. This [Flopometer](#) video describes this concept in a child-friendly way.

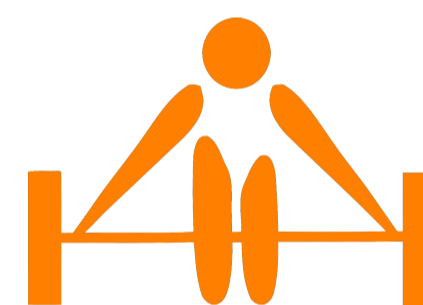
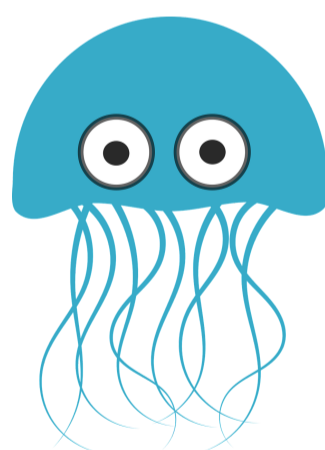
How?

Help your child understand the difference between feeling tense and feeling relaxed by asking them to imagine themselves as:



Stiff, uncooked spaghetti, then soft, cooked spaghetti

A rigid robot, then a floppy jellyfish floating in water



A body-builder flexing each muscle group one by one

Alternatively, read a tense and relax [script](#) out loud. Use a calming tone and pick a quiet time like after lunch or before bed when you won't feel rushed

Follow along with a guided tense and relax exercise like the one in [this video](#) by GoZen

Hint: Just like Calm Breathing, Tense and Relax exercises are best practiced regularly so they will be more effective when your child needs to calm their body down.



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Helping Children Move Their Bodies

What is it?

Moving our bodies has many benefits for our physical, mental, and emotional health. Build in big or small movement breaks throughout the day to decrease stress and increase fun!

How?

When possible, get outside to enjoy the fresh air, remembering to follow [physical distancing guidelines](#) to keep you and others safe. There are lots of ways to get active that don't require a lot of equipment or time. Use your imagination and interests to come up with your own activities or try some of these examples:



Jump rope, kick a ball, toss a frisbee, play hopscotch, tag, or Red-Light Green-Light. Check out these [classic outdoor games](#).

Have a family dance party, pump up the music, dress up and let loose!



Combine screen time and active time with videos like [Cosmic Kids Yoga](#) and [GoNoodle](#)



Go on a scavenger hunt. Look for things like a feather, a y-shaped stick, a flat stone, a rock with a spot on it, five different leaves, something natural and red. See these [Scavenger Hunt printables](#) for more ideas.



Build an obstacle course with stations to cycle through. For example:

1. do 10 jumping jacks
2. jump over a row of canned goods
3. spin around 5 times
4. balance a cushion on your head for 10 seconds
5. pretend to hula hoop (or really hula hoop!)



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Spot the Thought

What is it?

Our thoughts can impact how we feel and act. Parents and caregivers can help children understand what a thought is and how some thoughts may be helpful while others unhelpful.

How?

Children can learn to become aware of their thoughts through regular practice.

Read picture books or share stories and ask your child about the character's thoughts.

When children relate to characters and events in books, they can feel less alone.

Examples include:

A Thought is a Thought

by Nikki Hedstrom

Don't Think About Purple Elephants

by Susan Whelan

I Think, I Am!

by Louise Hay
& Kristina Tracy

Look at pictures of people in different situations or expressing different emotions. Use [photos](#) of people in different situations, or a [wordless picture book](#) or magazine.



Ask your child to look for clues about what the people might be thinking.



Write down some helpful and unhelpful thoughts that are meaningful to your child on pieces of paper.

Label a paper bag as 'helpful' and another bag as 'unhelpful'. Take turns with your child selecting a thought and deciding which bag it belongs in.



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Creating a Helpful Mindset

What is it?

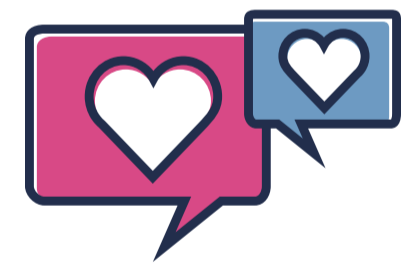
It's natural to have more worries than usual during times of uncertainty, but some worries can be unhelpful and persistent which can contribute to higher levels of anxiety. Parents and caregivers can help children cope with worries by helping them to shift unrealistic or pessimistic thoughts into more helpful and balanced thoughts. To learn more about helpful thinking visit [Anxiety Canada](#).

How?

Talking to your child about their worries lets them know that they're not alone. We all have worries and some can even take the form of frightening thoughts or images that pop into our heads from time to time. Children may prefer to draw their worries rather than talk about them.

Play the "What if?" game. Invite your child to share a worry or fear (e.g. what if I can't find my favourite toy). Brainstorm with your child possible outcomes that your child may feel better about (e.g. If I lost my favourite toy, I can ask an adult or a friend to help me...)

When the worry or fear returns, remind your child of the other possible outcomes discussed to alleviate the worry. (activity adapted from [Heart-Mind Online](#))



When unrealistic or unhelpful worries crop up, help your child come up with more helpful ways of thinking:

Unhelpful Thought

My friend doesn't like me.
I'm going to get sick.
I'm missing out on everything!



More Helpful Thought

My friend must be busy right now.
I'm doing everything I can to stay healthy.
I'm grateful for all the things I CAN do.



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Coping Cards

What is it?

It can be hard to remember helpful tools and phrases when children are feeling stressed or worried. Creating personalized cards, called Coping Cards, can be used to help support them through anxious feelings or challenging situations. Writing these ideas down can remind them 'in the moment' that they can manage these feelings and they will pass.

How?

Children can use personally meaningful phrases, drawings or objects to help calm and focus their mind by reminding them of the skills they have learned when they feel overwhelmed or when they need support to manage worried feelings or challenging situations.

Read picture books or share stories and ask your child what the characters did when they felt worried. Some examples include:

I Can Handle It

by Laurie Wright



Invite your child to trace their hand and write a meaningful or inspiring word on each fingertip. These can be reviewed before facing challenging situations and used as encouragement.
(activity adapted from [Heart-Mind Online](#))

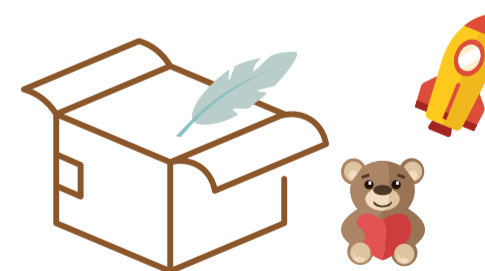
Ruby Finds a Worry

by Tom Percival

The Whatifs

by Emily Kilgore

Create a *Coping Skills Toolbox* with your child by asking them to go on a treasure hunt to find things that are comforting to them. Talk with your child about why they chose these items, how the items make them feel, and difficult situations when they could be used.



Together with your child, find a place to keep the toolbox.



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Taking Brave Steps

What is it?

Parents and caregivers can help children understand that being brave involves taking small steps to slowly face their fears, one step at a time. Taking small steps is one of the most valuable tools to use when facing fears or overcoming a challenge. To learn more, visit Anxiety Canada's [Helpful Tips for Doing Exposure Exercises](#) and [Rewarding Bravery](#).

How?

While it is common to avoid situations that cause fear and worry, when children learn about bravery and how to take small manageable steps to face their fears, they learn that they can move through their fears.

Explore with your child what it means to be brave by reading picture books or sharing stories. Ask your child questions like "How did the characters feel? When have you been scared before trying something new or hard?". Some examples include:

[A Little Bit Brave](#)

by Nicola Kinnear

[Hector's Favorite Place](#)

by Jo Rooks

[Scaredy Squirrel](#)

by Mélanie Watt

Talk with your child about a realistic goal they would like to reach. Some examples may include sleeping away from home or going on a playdate. Encourage your child to draw a picture of the goal.

Discuss together what the first small step towards reaching that goal could be, and what other steps could come next.



Reflect and share with your child all the brave steps they have taken over the years to overcome their fears, such as going to the dentist or the first day of school. Photos can provide great memories. Let your child know how proud you are of them.



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