

Together in Caring:
Supporting Mental
Wellness in
Home Child Care

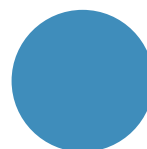
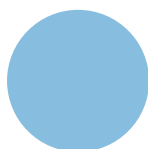


Anxiety

A Resource Guide for Home Child Care



Child Care Providers
RESOURCE NETWORK



About CCPRN:

Child Care Providers Resource Network is a non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to providing training, support, and information to individuals providing care in their homes—including home child care providers, parents, and grandparents. CCPRN celebrates 40 years as a successful organization with a network reach of over 4500 providers and parents. Please visit www.ccprn.com for more information.

Have a question? Contact us at childcare@ccprn.com.



Want to help? Donate now at www.ccprn.com/donate.

When you donate to CCPRN, you are securing a future where home child care providers are able to access the tools and support they need to provide quality care.

A special thank you to the Ottawa Community Foundation for supporting this project:

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Contents:

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction..... | 2 |
| A Note About COVID-19..... | 3 |
| What is Anxiety?..... | 4 |
| Children and Anxiety: Why Children Worry..... | 5 |
| Typical Fears at Different Ages..... | 9 |
| Children and Anxiety: Supporting Children in Their Ability to Handle Their Worries..... | 11 |
| Recommended Resources..... | 16 |
| Book List..... | 20 |
| Deep Breathing Exercises for Young Children..... | 21 |
| Creating a "Calm and Connected" Toolbox..... | 23 |
| Together in Caring..... | 24 |

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Introduction

We all worry—some more than others. The same is true for children. To a certain extent, it is natural and normal to worry and have fears. In fact, it is very common for young children to express a wide range of worries. The world is new and their frame of reference is small.

"Anxiety is normal. Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. It alerts us to threats, protects us from danger and helps us reach important goals. For example, it is normal to feel anxious when encountering a bear on a hike, or before taking an important exam." www.anxietycanada.com

Sometimes, our worries get ahead of us and anxiety or stress settle in making everyday moments more challenging and making it hard to feel grounded. The purpose of this guide is to provide you with general information and simple strategies that you might use if a child in your care is feeling anxious or stressed.

Please Note: If you are concerned about your child's health, their anxiousness, if they seem to have excessive fears or worries, and/or if their distress is interfering with daily life, consult with your doctor or other health care professional. If you are concerned about a child in your care, share your concerns with the family and work together to best support the child.



A Note About COVID–19

We know that it has been an especially challenging time for home child care providers, families, and children too. The COVID–19 pandemic has taken a toll, leaving many of us with heightened feelings of anxiety and stress—new worries and fears that leave us feeling vulnerable and exhausted.

You might be noticing that the little ones in your care are also feeling more anxious. Transition periods are likely longer than ever before and many parents are worried about their child starting care in the midst of these unprecedented circumstances.

For more information on supporting children as they start (or resume) daycare, please refer to *Transitioning to Child Care: A Resource Guide for Parents and Home Child Care Providers* available as a free download on our website at www.ccprn.com/resources.



What is Anxiety?

Source: www.heretohelp.bc.ca

Author: Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Anxiety is a normal reaction to many different kinds of events and situations in our lives. Anxiety is one of our internal warning systems that alerts us to danger or other threats and prepares our bodies to fight back or get out of a dangerous situation. Scientists call this the 'fight, flight, or freeze' response.

A manageable amount of anxiety from time to time can be helpful.

Normal anxiety...

- Is related to a specific situation or problem
- Lasts only as long as the situation or problem
- Is proportional to the situation or problem
- Is a realistic response to a realistic problem or situation



Children and Anxiety: Why Children Worry

Understanding worry

The brain's alarm system alerts us to **threat** and keeps us **safe**.

Preparedness and **prudence** help to keep our worries in check.



Preparing for a test, new job, or presentation will often lessen the worry and help to keep us calm. With increased preparedness, the level of threat decreases. Similarly, being prudent in a potentially dangerous situation (i.e. wearing a seatbelt or bike helmet) can also help to minimize the risk of danger and keep us safe.

Worry is useful, but when worry takes over, it can become anxiety. We call it an anxiety disorder when someone worries so much that it prevents them from taking part in normal activities.

It is normal for children to be worried about activities, people, places, and objects that are unfamiliar. It will probably take time



for them to get used to new situations. With time, what was once new becomes familiar. They gain experience and their brain matures to know better what is safe.

Keeping them safe

Because little children can't judge what is dangerous, they don't **prepare** for danger and aren't **prudent** enough to be careful and avoid it. It's the adult's job to keep them safe.



We prepare and are prudent on their behalf. As they grow, we teach them to prepare and be prudent for themselves: look both ways before crossing the road, wear a bike helmet, be aware of your surroundings, travel in pairs, have a designated driver, listen to that little voice, trust your instincts. Over time, they learn to anticipate and judge potential threats and when a worry takes hold, how to plan and prepare in order to reduce their fear or concern.

Young children may worry about things that we know won't hurt them. They can't yet judge how severe a problem may be or how likely it is to actually happen. They may be afraid of things that aren't dangerous or that are so unlikely to happen that there is no point in preparing for them.

The brain's alarm system is activated when faced with a real or anticipated loss or threat to safety. Through our relationship with a child, we can help to calm their alarm system by listening and acknowledging their worries and by helping them to understand the likelihood and/or severity of the threat.

When children are young, and their experiences are all new, their frame of reference is very small. Many experiences present as a potential threat resulting in some children having lots of worries.



For example:

An infant who loses sight of their parent truly doesn't know where that parent went or if they'll be back—Where are you? Who will take care of me? Who will keep me safe? They cry and learn that although we might be out of sight, we are close by and will always respond to their needs. As they grow and experience more frequent and prolonged types of separation (nighttime, being cared for by Grandma, child care, etc.), they learn that the parent always returns which builds trust in the relationship. Their worries are calmed by that knowledge and by the predictability of the experience—the parent's consistent return.

Eventually, this worry dissipates and the child is comfortable going to school, to a friend's house, and before you know it—moving out on their own. Their frame of reference for "being apart" is large and they are able to stay connected without having to have the parent within sight.

Another example:

A very young child who experiences a paper cut for the first time might panic at the sight of their own blood, cry out from the sharp pain, and be overcome with fear. Never having experienced a paper cut before, the brain's alarm system is activated—What is this? What's happening to me? Will I be okay?

An older child, having experienced a few paper cuts, now has a slightly larger frame of reference. They might still be concerned and they might still cry, but on some level know that they will be okay. They've had a paper cut before and experience tells them that it will heal, probably in a day or two.



As adults who've experienced many paper cuts (and most likely a few injuries even more severe) our frame of reference is quite large—so large that our alarm system is not activated in the least. We might not even notice a small cut until someone points it out (or we use hand sanitizer!).

Understanding the brain's alarm system and a child's limited frame of reference helps to explain why they worry. When we understand why children worry, we are better able to support them in their ability to handle their own fears and worries.

Typical Fears at Different Ages

Most children are afraid of at least one thing; fear is normal and even healthy, since it makes us careful about approaching things that might be dangerous. Children's fears generally change as they get older. In fact, psychologists have identified typical fears for different age groups. The following examples are taken from the book *Growing Up Brave: Expert Strategies for Helping Your Child Overcome Fear Stress and Anxiety* by Donna Pincus. Every child is different, but this list may help you decide whether a child's fears are typical for their age.

Infants and Toddlers

- Loud noises
- Large or unfamiliar objects
- Strangers
- Being separated from parents or other caregivers



Preschoolers (ages 3–6)

- Costumed characters, people wearing a mask, monsters, ghosts
- Fear of the dark and sleeping alone
- Specific fears: dogs, insects, blood, water, elevators, etc.
- Being separated from parents or other caregivers

Early School Age (ages 6–10)

- Social pressures, friendships
- Real world dangers: burglars, fire, storms, illness, injury, car accidents, etc.
- Death of someone in the family
- Not keeping up with others in classroom, school failure



Middle School Age (ages 10–13)

- Social status, being part of the group, comparison with peers
- Making and keeping friends, avoiding enemies (bullying)
- Academic and athletic performance

Teen Years (13 +)

- Sexuality and body image
- Social relationships
- The future, careers
- Moral and global issues, for example, social injustice, matters of right and wrong, the environment, climate change, wars, etc.



These fears are normal and most children and young people work through them and deal with the challenges life presents them with.

However, it is important to offer extra support if:

- a child's fears are interfering with their ability to function, such as going to school, being with other people, trying out new situations, getting enough sleep, etc.
- a child's fears are making it difficult for other members of the family to function.

We talk about an anxiety disorder if a person's fears become debilitating to the point that they:

- prevent that person from engaging in the usual activities of daily living or
- prevent them from enjoying life.

Handout for Children and Anxiety, workshop for Child Care Providers Resource Network, given by Betsy Mann, November 2021.

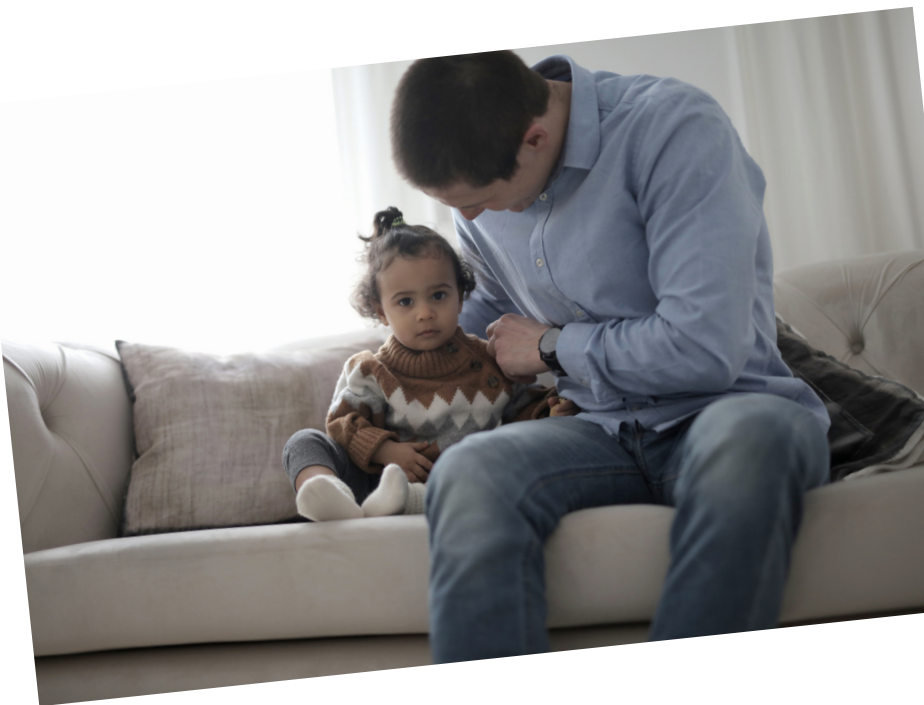
Children and Anxiety: Supporting Children in Their Ability to Handle Their Worries

Offering attentive presence

Caregivers (and parents!) know that some fears are typical of different ages and stages of development. Children need reassurance and support while they mature and grow out of these typical fears...and into new worries, typical of older ages. The brain will continue to alert us to possible problems all our lives.

Reassurance and support are best provided by the adults that children are attached to. The attachment relationship is built by offering attentive and responsive presence, for instance by:

- listening attentively to what they have to say
- naming their emotions to help them become self-aware
- taking a moment, even when we are busy



Making life predictable

We all feel less stressed when life is more predictable. Routines give children the sense of the familiar. They know what is coming next, so it feels like life is under control. Be prepared for children's alarm system to go off more easily during transition times, moving between activities. You can use visual cues, like a chart with pictures, to give children an even greater sense of control over what is going to happen next.

When things happen in the same order every day, there is structure to their day. Someone is in charge of things and they don't have to worry about what might happen. Routine gives children a sense of security.

Children learn to trust when the people who care for them follow a dependable routine. This is the foundation on which they build their trust in the safety of the larger world.

What to include in the routine to increase security and reduce stress and worry?

- free play
- stories
- movement
- relaxation



Free play

Children work out their worries through play. It is important that they have lots of opportunities to choose the way they play with materials and toys. They may not express their worries in words, but in play, they process their fears

- of things they see as dangerous
- of the unknown
- of separation from their attachment figures (peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek are games that practice separation and return)

Free play also develops children's sense of control and agency, the sense that what they do makes a difference in their world. They can start to feel that if there is something to worry about in the future, they will be able to handle it. Four year olds, for instance, will often choose to pretend to be powerful figures like superheroes, firefighters, teachers and parents—all people who can fix problems and order other people around.

Children also develop a sense of agency when they get to make appropriate choices in their everyday activities. For instance, sometimes craft time can just be "Here are some materials. Do whatever your imagination comes up with."



Stories

We may wonder why children like to hear scary stories. It is a way for them to feel their fears when they are with someone they know will keep them safe. At the end of the story, whatever was scary has disappeared and everything is fine again. Many fairy tales follow this pattern. For instance, in Hansel and Gretel, the children experience separation from their parents and meet a dangerous witch, but in the end they escape the danger and get back home through their own cleverness.

Reading or telling stories like this allow children to find out that their worries don't need to control them; they can control their worries. They will often ask for the same story over and over again, an indication that they are still working on those concerns.



Movement

When the brain's alarm system goes off, it sets off a reaction in the body that prepares us for activity, either running away from danger or fighting it off. Most of the things that children worry about can't be escaped or fought, but the urge to be active still builds up. By having regular periods of movement in the routine, this urge can be safely discharged. Movement can take many forms:

- slow and quiet, as in yoga
- fast and noisy, like putting on music and dancing
- building an indoor obstacle course
- going outside to explore puddles in the rain

Relaxation

Sometimes the best way to discharge excess tension from worries is to practice relaxation exercises. This can be a good activity just before nap time. Here are some child-friendly suggestions:

- Spaghetti toes, a progressive relaxation visualization from the MindMasters2 program (See recommended resources below.)
- Calming music
- Deep breathing (See page 19 for examples)
- Slow breathing while watching the “snow” settle in a snow globe. The globe acts as a visual point of focus and also as a timer for the breathing activity.
- Positive visualizations to set aside worries (for instance, the Umbilikiki exercise from the MindMasters2 program).
- Mindfulness meditation (for instance, from the book *Sitting Still Like a Frog*. See recommended resources below.)
- A Worry Box to help separate self from worries (See also the book [The Worry Box](#) in the book list below.)

These are all coping tools that children can learn to use when they are young. Some of them are better adapted to children aged 3 or older. Their usefulness will depend on the child’s particular temperament and stage of development. They are tools that children will be able to carry forward in their lives to deal with their worries in the future. In fact, adults who live and work with children might find some of them very helpful in handling their own worries and tensions! Parents and caregivers of young children can help build a foundation on which to bounce back from life’s challenges, now and in their future.

Recommended Resources

Websites

www.anxietycanada.com

Anxiety Canada provides many resources for adults, youth and children, including information, self-help tools and videos.

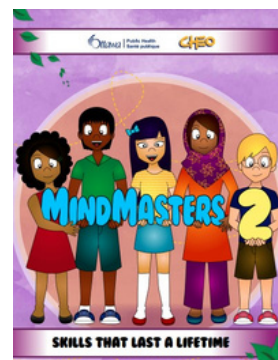


www.childmind.org

The U.S.-based Child Mind Institute publishes many articles about parenting challenges under the heading “For Families,” including several about supporting children’s mental health and preventing parental burnout. (<https://childmind.org/article/preventing-parent-burnout/>)

www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/professionals-and-partners/iecmh.aspx#Mindmasters-2

MindMasters – A program developed at CHEO for helping children (ages 4 – 9) to build positive living skills like listening, dealing with anger, staying calm, deep breathing, visualization, looking on the bright side. Watch videos, download audio and PDF files from the Ottawa Public Health website. Go to the above link and scroll about halfway down the page to click on MindMasters 2. The site also includes a list of books on related topics, suggested by the Ottawa Public Library. The MindMasters program and resources are available in English and French.



www.drcheng.ca/page1/page1.html

Dr. Michael Cheng is a child and family psychiatrist at CHEO. He has posted information for parents on his website, including a PowerPoint presentation on anxiety, updated in July 2017 to include information about the importance of attachment-based strategies and controlling time spent on screens (phone, computer, video games, TV).

www.elinesnel.com/en/eline-snel-3/

Eline Snel is the author of *Sitting Still Like a Frog*. Her website offers information on mindfulness for children. An app is available from iTunes that includes guided meditations for different ages.

www.hincksdellcrest.org/ABC/Parent-Resource/The-Worried-Child

The website of the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre, a children's mental health treatment, research and teaching centre in Toronto, includes a section that covers a variety of topics related to anxiety: separation worries, panic responses, frightening memories or thoughts, fixed and repetitive behaviours and social anxiety. Parents will find explanations of what is typical behaviour at different ages, when to be concerned and when to seek help. In each case, suggestions are given to help parents best respond to children's worries.

<https://www.lynnlyonsnh.com/books-videos/>

Author and Social Worker Lynn Lyons offers videos and webinars on her website devoted to helping families with children and youth experiencing anxiety. (See also her book, *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous & Independent Children*, co-authored with Reid Wilson.)

Online Tools

Smiling Mind – This app has mindfulness exercises for children of different ages and adults. Children can have their own login and the app will log their activity.

<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-app>

Wellbeyond meditation – Meditation app to help children focus, centre, get to sleep, become aware of feelings and develop kindness. <https://wellbeyond.com/kids>

Stop, Think, Breathe – Apps for children and adults that start with checking feelings and then providing an appropriate meditation. Mostly free. www.stopbreathethink.com

Story Books for Children: See book list on page 18

- Iris the Dragon – Series of books dealing with a variety of mental health topics including anxiety. All seven titles are available as e-books, downloadable free. A non-profit initiative supported in part by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. www.irisdragon.com



Self-help for Children

- When My Worries Get Too Big! A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live with Anxiety by Kari Dunn Buron (2006) (4-8 years)
- Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents) by Eline Snel. Ages 5-12
- Sometimes I Worry Too Much But Now I Know How to Stop Book. by Dawn Huebner. Ages 5 - 10.
- What to Do When You Worry Too Much by Dawn Huebner. (workbook for parents and children aged 6 - 12)

Books and Pamphlets for Parents

- Growing Up Brave: Expert Strategies for Helping Your Child Overcome Fear, Stress, and Anxiety by Donna Pincus (2012).
- Kids Can Cope: Parenting Resilient Children at Home and at School, Psychology Foundation of Canada, (2012)
<http://hpri.fullerton.edu/Community/documents/ResilienceChildrenBooklet.pdf>
- Family Guide to Reducing Anxiety, Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre, <https://wocrc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/family-guide-to-reducing-anxiety.pdf>



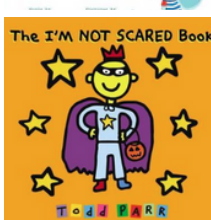
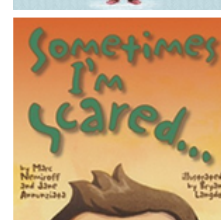
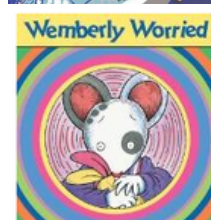
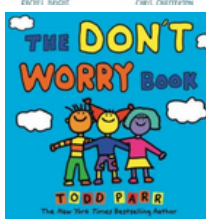
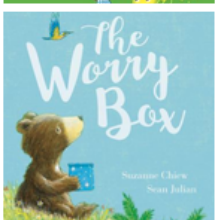
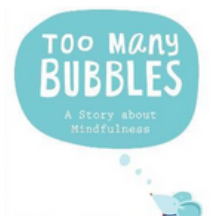
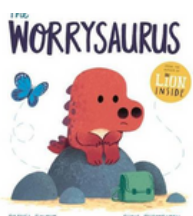
Handout for Children and Anxiety, workshop for Child Care Providers Resource Network, given by Betsy Mann, November 2021.

Book List



Picture books that address worries and fears.

- Ruby Finds a Worry by Tom Percival
- The Worrysaurus by Rachel Bright
- Breathe by Scott Magoon
- Captain Starfish by Davina Bell and Allison Colpoys
- How Big Are Your Worries Little Bear? by Jayneen Sanders
- Too Many Bubbles by Christine Peck
- The Worry Box by Suzanne Chiew and Sean Julian
- The Don't Worry Book by Todd Parr
- Give Maggie a Chance by Frieda Wishinsky
- Wemberly Worried by Kevin Henkes
- Sometimes I'm Scared by Mike Nemiroff and Jane Annunziata
- The I'm Not Scared Book by Todd Parr



Ask your local librarian for other great recommendations.

Deep Breathing Exercises for Young Children

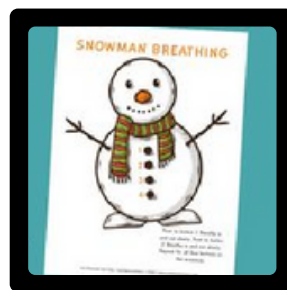
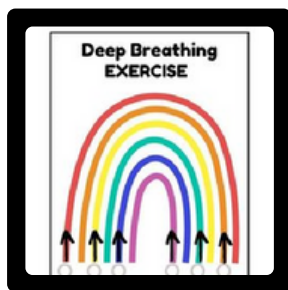
Learning how to take full deep breaths is one of the easiest ways to help a child feel calmer during moments of anxiety, stress, or upset.

“Deep breathing is one of the best ways to lower stress in the body. This is because when you breathe deeply, it sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax. The brain then sends this message to your body. Those things that happen when you are stressed, such as increased heart rate, fast breathing, and high blood pressure, all decrease as you breathe deeply to relax.”

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/uz2255>

Help children to notice what breathing feels like when they are calm and relaxed. Have them lie on their backs with hands on their tummy to feel the gentle rise and fall with each breath. This is called deep breathing, or belly breathing.

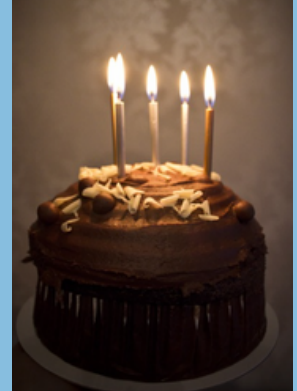
Here are a few visual examples to encourage deep breathing:



- Flower: <https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/36873290687585245/>
- Rainbow: <https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/633387438168705/>
- Snowman: <https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/229683649734810015/>
- Balloon: <https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/326440672999395874/>
- Snake: <https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/1011339660041201827/>

Other ideas to encourage deep breathing:

- Smell a delicious imaginary cake with a long, slow inhale and blow out the candles with a long, slow exhale or smell a delicious imaginary cup of hot chocolate with a long, slow inhale and cool down your cocoa with a long, slow, exhale.
- Hold up three fingers. Smell a delicious imaginary cake with a long, slow inhale and blow out one candle (one finger). Repeat inhale/exhale for remaining "candles".
- Measured breaths—count to 4 as you inhale, hold for 4, count to 4 as you exhale.
- Take a deep breath in and buzz like a bee as you exhale with a long buzzing/humming sound.
- Have children lie on their backs with a small stuffy on their tummy, watch the stuffy rise and fall with each belly breath.
- Take a deep breath in and exhale through pursed lips to make a vibrating "purring" sound.
- Inhale and squeeze/tense up your body (arms, hands, eyes, toes, etc.). Hold for 3 seconds. Exhale and relax.
- Find a dandelion that's gone to seed and practice long exhales.



- Combine deep breathing with nature sounds (ocean waves, birds, the wind, etc.) or guided meditation. Search Pinterest or YouTube for many examples and scripts suitable for young children.

Creating a "Calm & Connected" Toolbox:

A child feeling anxious or worried may benefit from the calming, predictable, and rhythmical motor movements associated with one or more of the following items. Focusing on a fidget or comfort toy can help to re-direct anxious thoughts and promote positive emotions.

Start with an actual box or bin and add items that engage one or more of the five senses. Depending on the age of your child(ren), your toolbox might include:

- small weighted bags, bean bags, or microwaveable heat bags
- soft/textured toys, bits of ribbon, fabric, felt, or yarn
- fidgets: spinners, poppers, small stretchy/squishy items
- stress balls, weighted balls, textured sensory balls
- plastic hour glass, snow globe, kaleidoscope, or sensory bottle
- small rainstick, egg shaker, or small container with a bit of rice
- silly putty or other dough (scented or unscented)
- scented sachet bags, cinnamon sticks (store in an airtight bag)
- visual reminders for deep breathing, pinwheel, bubbles
- photos of special people and/or places

When the toolbox is new, children will likely be interested in exploring all of the items. Over time however, and as needed, they might seek out one or two items in particular. Or perhaps you might notice that a child seems worried or upset and you can suggest a bit of quiet time with one of the items. Some children might like to sit on or near you as they explore the toolbox. Your attentive presence is the most important tool in the toolbox.

Together in Caring

Problems with anxiety are more and more common in children today. Knowing if a child's worries are part of normal development or if you need to seek more help is the first step in supporting the children in your care.

Occasional worrying is part of life—learning how to handle our worries and bounce back from challenging or difficult situations nurtures and builds resilience.

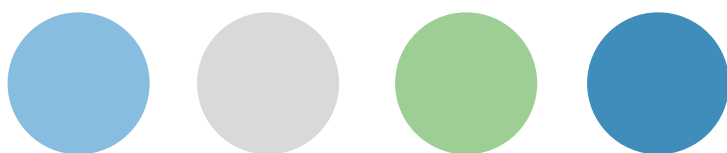
As a home child care provider you can work together with families to reduce the factors that contribute to anxiety and implement practical strategies that will support children to better handle their worries.





www.ccprn.com

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