

Anxiety in young children.

What's normal?

All babies and children from time to time will experience some fear or anxiety. They might do so when they come up against challenging tasks, unfamiliar people (known as *stranger anxiety*) or when they are separated from their main caregiver (known as *separation anxiety*).

Children might also feel anxious when faced with new situations such as starting nursery, moving house or the birth of a sibling.

Whilst it is possible for a child to suffer from acute anxiety, some occasional anxiety is completely normal for most children.

Different types of anxiety and tips on how to manage them

General anxiety in toddlers and pre-schoolers

Toddlers might feel anxious when faced with new situations such as going to nursery, moving to a new house or the birth of a sibling.. Because they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling, it's important to be aware of possible signs of anxiety in their behaviour.

6 Signs that a toddler is experiencing anxiety

1. They may become tearful, clingy or irritable
2. They might become out of control during outbursts
3. They could be having difficulty sleeping
4. They could start waking in the night
5. They could be having bad dreams
6. They might start to wet the bed

5 tips on how to help children who are anxious

1. **Show children that you are available to talk about their worries:** Let them know you have noticed that they seem worried and that you want to try and listen and help. But if they don't want to talk, don't force the issue. Try and engage them in play and stay close and available. Young children usually find it easier to open up when they're doing something else, like drawing or going for a walk.
2. **Prepare them for change:** If you know that a child is due to experience a significant change, like the birth of a sibling, changing school or moving to a new house, it's really helpful to try and prepare them in advance for the change. For instance, if they are starting nursery and you think that they are feeling more nervous than excited, you can talk about the

mixed feelings they might have, for example, "It's very exciting to go to big school - but it's fine if feel that it's a bit scary too, that's completely normal."

3. **Show that you understand the depth of their feelings, and that you believe that they are valid:** It's natural to want to quickly reassure an anxious child, especially if the worry seems quite trivial to you. But just remember, what may seem like a little thing to you, may be a big deal to them. Before jumping in to reassure, spend time listening and getting a real idea about the child's specific worries, feelings, and thoughts. This can take time but stick with it because it lets the child know that you are taking them and their worries seriously. This will help them to develop trusting relationships as they grow up. It also helps to develop the child's ability to reflect on their emotions as they develop into adulthood.
4. **Suggest different ways of looking at a worry:** When you've really listened to what the child thinks and feels, gently introduce different ways of looking at their worry. For instance, if they fear a particular situation happening, help the child to consider other potential outcomes that could happen that are less catastrophic. By doing this, you are helping the child to learn to manage their anxiety. They will also start to become more resilient.
5. **Don't put pressure on a child who is feeling shy:** Some young children can feel very shy and nervous in social situations. These children need extra support and reassurance to help them to develop their confidence gradually. If you push them into the limelight when they're not ready, it will only make them feel more anxious and exposed, and it could take them even longer to develop confidence.

Helping babies manage general anxiety

The best way to soothe a baby who is showing anxiety by crying is by cuddling and using soothing, reassuring voice. Picking up babies when they're anxious or upset doesn't spoil them or make them too dependent on you. In fact, it helps them to develop higher levels of trust and resilience. Having these will help them to become more independent.

Stranger Anxiety

From around six months, babies will develop what is known as '**stranger anxiety**'. This is the distress babies experience when they meet or are left in the care of people who are unfamiliar to them. This is completely normal. Most babies will have formed

attachments with the familiar people who care for them, so when they are forced to encounter – or be cared for by – someone who they don't know, it can be unsettling. Children can suffer from stranger anxiety up until the age of around three.

4 Signs a baby may be experiencing stranger anxiety

Babies show their emotions more strongly when they are anxious. For instance they might:

1. cry loudly
2. become unusually fussy
3. become quiet very suddenly
4. start looking at the stranger with fear.

3 tips for dealing with stranger anxiety

1. **Respond quickly:** The baby will be calmed more effectively if these communications are responded to as soon as they happen.
2. **Reassure the baby:** Some good ways for a baby to feel reassured is by being held or gently talked to.
3. **Make them feel that the new stranger is 'ok' and safe:** If the 'stranger' is you, and the parent is present, the parent should try find ways to indicate to the baby that you are a trusted and safe person for them to be with.

Or you can communicate this to the baby if you are looking after them when they react with anxiety to a stranger being introduced.

If the baby receives this kind of reassurance, they are more likely to develop secure attachments with new caregivers, and, as a result, feel braver about exploring new places and meeting new people!

Separation Anxiety

If a child is separated from their regular caregiver it's also normal for them to experience anxiety. This reaction normally kicks in at six months when parents usually start returning to work, and it can go on in some form during the pre-school years. It can make going to sleep, separating from parents, or settling in at nursery or school very difficult at times.

As with stranger anxiety, if you and the child's parents and carers respond consistently with understanding and reassurance, babies and children will learn to feel braver and confident when they are on their own.

For more detailed information and tips on how to manage separation anxiety see our separate section on [Sleep](#), [Separation Anxiety](#) and [Relationship with keyworkers](#).

Fears and Phobias

It is common for pre-school-age children to develop specific fears or phobias, for example, animals, insects, water, and the dark. A phobia is an extreme fear which causes a lot of distress and affects the child's life significantly. For example, a fear of dogs would be called a phobia if it means that a child refuses ever to go to the park to play.

2 tips on helping children with phobias

1. **Take the phobia seriously:** The good news is that phobias usually go away on their own. But while they're happening, it's very important to take them seriously so that the child feels understood and supported.
2. **Encourage the child to talk about the phobia, and work on it together:** Help the child to talk about their anxiety and come up with ways of managing the fear together. This allows children to feel secure and crucially helps them to identify, articulate, and manage their emotions as they grow up.

Impact of a health crisis

Anxiety escalates during a health crisis and babies and toddlers quickly pick up on their parents or carers' anxiety. They might become more unsettled, clingy, and demanding. Also, they might behave like younger children (regress). It's really important to remember that this is normal attachment behaviour and if parents and carers name the anxiety and respond with warmth and reassurance, then babies and toddlers will learn to recognise and manage their anxiety as they grow up.

Top tip: Try hard to manage your own anxiety in front of children for they can pick up on it. However, you feel inside it's important to try to stay calm. This not only helps children to feel safe, but it also shows them ways of managing when being under pressure.

Further resources

You could try reading children the picture book, [Owl Babies](#) by Martin Waddell to soothe anxiety in children.