

# Supporting children and young people experiencing anxiety

Anxiety can be difficult to spot because it presents in many ways. The important point is to notice if there's any concern and seek further advice and assistance.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal reaction to situations where we perceive dangers or threats.

For some people it can feel overwhelming, last longer and interfere with their daily life. Learn more about [common signs and symptoms of anxiety](#).

## How educators can help

As an educator it's not your role to diagnose a mental health issue – what you can do is notice those children or young people who might be experiencing anxiety, and act accordingly.

The [BETLS Observational Tool](#) can help you gather and document information and observations about a child or young person. This can help you identify and raise concerns for anyone who may need more attention or targeted assistance.

Educators may also find the [Mental Health Continuum](#) a good tool to help deepen their understanding of the difference between mental health and mental health conditions, and help inform your actions.

If you've noticed any changes in the child or young person, you could speak with your wellbeing team or senior staff to discuss next steps.

If you are the best person to have the conversation with the child or young person, you can plan for this and [prepare for the](#)

[conversation](#) ensuring you also look after your own mental health and wellbeing.

It's OK to check in gently with the child or young person. For example, you could say, "I've noticed you seem a bit worried lately, do you want to talk about it?" If they don't, let them know you're there for them and that you'll continue to check in.

Remember to always follow your learning community's policies and processes, including discussing your concerns with senior leadership or your wellbeing team.

## Strategies for educators

There are many strategies educators can put in place to support children and young people experiencing anxiety. This can include creating a calm and supportive learning environment, and embracing diversity and inclusive practices.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs that build resilience and coping strategies can also be very helpful for those experiencing anxiety. These can be embedded as part of a whole-learning community approach. Learn more about resilience and [social and emotional learning](#).

On an individual level, there are also many helpful ways you can support children and young people experiencing anxiety, depending on their developmental stage. Here are some ideas:

### **Build emotional awareness**

- Give young children the language to label how they're feeling. For example, say, "it looks like you might be feeling worried".
- Help children and young people understand that being anxious is normal, and there are ways to manage it.
- Help them recognise their own internal cues (for example, if they have a racing heart).
- Support them to notice their self-talk and develop some positive coping statements.
- Help them understand that avoiding the things that make them anxious, while useful as a short-term fix, is likely to make things harder in the future.

### **Provide mental health and wellbeing awareness and education activities**

Promote help-seeking and discuss mental health and wellbeing with children and young people. Encourage actions they can take to look after themselves such as:

- staying active
- eating well
- connecting with friends and family
- getting enough sleep
- limiting alcohol and other drugs.

For some children and young people this might include connecting to country, culture, community and other things that are important to their beliefs and values.

### **Support practical strategies**

- Give notice before transitions like changing rooms or activities.
- Use a step-by-step approach to break tasks into manageable chunks.
- Help them recall times they've managed anxious feelings before and the strategies that worked for them.
- Talk about helpful strategies you use to manage stress and anxiety (for example, going for a walk, talking to a friend, deep breathing).

- Set realistic expectations to help reduce stress about tasks.
- Gently support them to face challenges rather than avoid them.
- Promote self-regulation strategies like deep breathing
- Help them replace worst-case scenario thinking with questions such as "What is the most likely outcome?" or "What happened last time?"
- Validate their experience.

### **Encourage participation and connection**

- Encourage them to try new things and remind them it's OK if learning takes time.
- Support participation in age and stage-appropriate activities and routines.
- Create a safe, predictable environment and help them feel they belong.

### **Partner with families and others**

- Support families to develop consistent routines to help create predictability (for example, drop-off rituals).
- Enlist support from important people in their lives such as family, peers, and other educators.
- Strengthen relationships with their family and community so you can share information and support them together.
- You may need some support to prepare for any difficult conversations.

### **If more support is required**

If you have concerns about a child or young person, follow your learning community's processes. This might include talking to your wellbeing or leadership team and using tools such as the BETLS observational tool to help understand what support might be needed.

## Support from external health professionals

If further support is needed, work with your wellbeing team, the child or young person and the family to refer to a [health professional](#). If a [mental health treatment plan](#) is required, they will require support from their GP.

A range of health professionals and services offer information, treatment and support for anxiety conditions, as well as self-help strategies. Effective treatment helps children and young people learn how to manage their anxiety.

There are also a range of community services to be considered such as family support services, occupational and speech therapists. Or it may include involving [First Nations health services](#) or [LGBTIQ+ services](#).

### Psychological treatment

Psychological treatment can empower people to address their thinking and behavioural patterns, helping manage anxiety and unhelpful thoughts. Common approaches include reducing avoidance, learning coping skills like relaxation, and reframing unhelpful thoughts.

In younger children, support may focus more on behavioural and parental approaches (for example, supporting families respond helpfully to anxious behaviours).

### Medical treatments

Research shows that psychological therapies are the most effective treatment option for people with anxiety. However, if symptoms persist, some medical treatments may be helpful. For instance, some types of antidepressant medication can help people to manage anxiety, even if they're not experiencing symptoms of depression.

### Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about recognising behaviours that might indicate early signs of mental health issues, how to talk about these issues, and how to provide appropriate and timely support in the [Early Support](#) domain.

## External links

Beyond Blue – [Treatments for anxiety](#)

headspace – [What is anxiety & the effects on mental health](#)

headspace – [Tips for a healthy headspace](#)

Orygen – [Anxiety and young people](#)

Raising Children Network – [Anxiety: the stepladder approach](#)

Black Dog Institute – [Understanding anxiety in children](#)

## Bibliography

Visit [Supporting children and young people with anxiety](#) for a list of references for the Fact Sheet.

