



## Tips for Parents of Anxious Children and for Anxious Parents

and for any parents of any children really.

Here are some faith filled ideas for dealing with anxiety when faced with new or emotionally demanding times & transitions.



CHURCH OF IRELAND  
**Children's Ministry**

Incorporating Sunday School Society for Ireland and Children's Ministry Network

## TIPS TO ENCOURAGE TALKING

1. **Fort Building / Under the Covers chats.** There's a science to this. Kids constructing their own spaces, feeling enclosed and safe, feeling a freedom as the space is different to the one full of rules and norms outside. There's an article about it here:  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/05/18/why-kids-love-building-forts-why-experts-say-they-might-need-them-more-than-ever/>

Provide all the materials the child needs. If they are younger you may need to help them build it, if they are older they may be happier to build it themselves. Ask permission to enter (maybe bearing the gift of a torch or a snack!) Once inside, there is opportunity to chat and listen without outside distractions.

If you normally do a reflection or a family Bible study, perhaps the fort building can be the Bible study as it reminds us of God and the safety of being hidden in Him.



Psalm 18.2 **The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.**

2. **Spinning** – go for a drive and have a chat without eye contact. Some children find face to face sharing quite intense and off putting. Maybe your child will respond better when you are looking straight ahead while you talk.
3. **Doing / Making / Doodling / Building** – some children express themselves better if their hands are busy, if they are making something with you or beside you or if they are out in nature, taking a walk. The distraction with their hands clears any clutter in their minds and helps them say what's worrying them. So grab some playdough or do some scribble monsters or build some lego towers and have a chat.
4. **Telling Stories** – what scared you as a child? Children love to hear your stories and to know that they're not alone in their feelings when they are afraid or uncertain.

## Tips to Encourage Listening

Sometimes when our children come to us with a problem or a worry we jump in and problem solve, or we tell our kids that there's no need to worry. But fixing the problem or dismissing their feelings may not be what they need.

1. Ask them - what do you want from me? To take Action, to give advice, or just to listen? 9 times out of 10, they just want us to listen.
2. From Barnados website – there are fantastic tips for Back to School here in the link. They really focus on worry and how it's felt in the body. <https://www.barnardos.ie/tipsheets>

Barnardos also highlights some books about worries which you could read with your child, which should be available in your local library:

"The Huge Bag of Worries" by Virginia Ironside

"Bad Day" by Ruby Roth

"Ruby's worry" by Tom Percival

### Some questions to ask your child whilst reading together;

- What are some of the things that can worry you?
- What does worry feel like in your body?
- What can I do to help you when you are feeling worried?

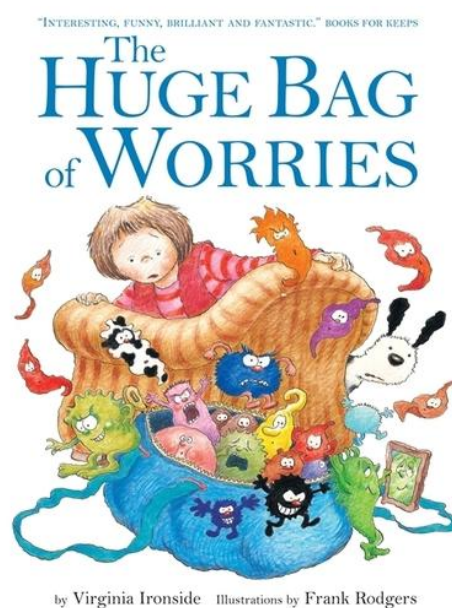
### In Children's and Family Ministry, we might add...

- Which of these worries can we take to God?
- Is God interested in them?
- What happens when you give your worries to God?

Or other simple open ended questions that allow your child to talk and you to listen.

### Very simple techniques to show your child you're listening include:

making eye contact, asking them to expand or explain something they said, acknowledging the feelings or thoughts they express, repeating something back to them to show you have heard them.



## Ways to Deal with Anxious Energy, Racing thoughts & Big Feelings

**Movement.** *“As an adult I get anxious when leaving the house. Always have. I need the loo, I lose my keys, I get a bit irritated with the kids. I worry we’ll forget something we need or, if it’s somewhere new, that we’ll get lost or won’t find parking. One thing that really helps me is to stretch and shake out the nervous energy as dramatically and loudly as possible. It makes me laugh, it calms me down, it puts me into the moment where I realise it’s ok if we forget things or are 5 minutes late or need to circle around a few times before we park. And my kids think it’s hilarious so instead of being snapped at, they’re laughing too. You can do this for your child OR you can model acknowledging your stress and then dealing with your stress. (Disclaimer: Sometimes I forget to do this because I’m stressed!...and human.)”* Lydia, Sunday School Society for Ireland

Other movements can involve wall press ups, jumping jacks and tensing all your muscles and then releasing them. You can make it into a game where you do short bursts of intense movement at different times throughout the day – maybe even sound a horn!

**Worry Prayers** – You can pop bubble wrap or burst bubbles for these sensory prayers:

### Worry Prayers

Matthew 6:25-26 'Don't worry about your life.  
Don't worry about having something to eat, drink or wear.  
Isn't life more than food or clothing? Look at the birds.  
They don't plant or harvest. They don't even store grain in  
barns. Yet your Father in heaven takes care of them.

**Are you not worth more than the birds?'**

God loves you and wants to take care of you. Tell God something that you are worried about and ask Him to help you. Burst one of the bubbles as a sign that you are releasing or letting go of your worry and giving it to God.  
Take a strip of Bubble wrap or a bottle of bubbles with you.  
If you are worried this week, pop a bubble and give your worry to God.



## Sensory Bottles

There are lots of sensory bottle or 'calming jar' tutorials online. Here's one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7zp7KbxbKY> The objects in the jar represent your racing thoughts. Shake up the bottle, focus on everything swirling and then settling and imagine your thoughts slowly quietening down. Tell the story of Jesus calming the storm. Ask Jesus to speak to your mind and the anxiety racing around your body. Practise saying 'Peace be still.' Thank God that He is in control.

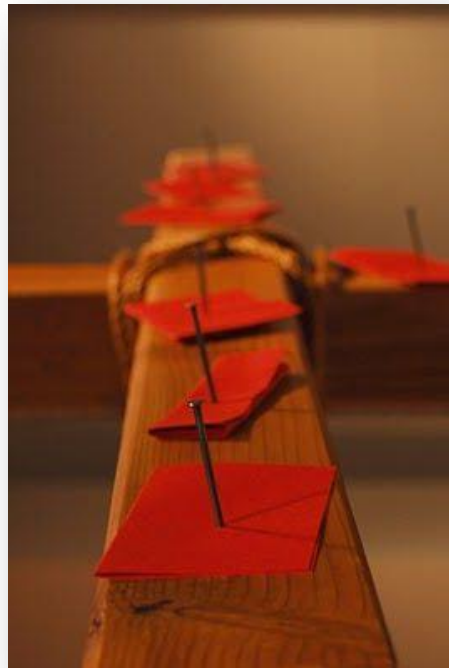


## Journaling.

*"I don't enjoy the thought of journaling, however, it is the most effective way for me to deal with my anxiety, especially when my anxiety disrupts my sleep. I write down what's worrying me – all that worst case scenario thinking, all those 'not good enough' thoughts and the anger that comes with feeling I should be coping. When I'm all done, the most important bit is writing something kind about myself at the end. When we're anxious, we're in survival mode and we're judging and boy, are we self-judging. Parents, don't just offer this to your child, try it for yourself too."* Lydia, Sunday School Society for Ireland

There are lots of different ways to journal:

Write or draw worries, and then rip up the page and throw it out. This can bring release.



Journaling can be done more prayerfully with a pocket cross or a cross you make from objects in your home. Both you and your child can write or draw your worries and put them at the foot of the cross or pin them onto the cross as a sign you are giving your worries to Jesus. If you have someone who is nifty in DIY you can always nail your worries to the cross!

Children can have a worry journal and write and/or draw in it daily. Note, it can take 4 or 5 days before you see the benefit of this. Again, for younger children, colours can signify different feelings one day and pictures can be drawn another day.

If your child is particularly anxious you can set aside 10 minutes to worry every day together and at the end of the daily session, you can drop the journal with all the worries into a sealed box. This helps a child understand that their worries are valid but don't have to steal joy from other parts of their day.

## Ways to ground yourself when together....

### **Breathing:**

Breathing techniques are tried and tested ways to break the cycle of adrenaline coursing through your body when you start to feel anxious. They can be fun and creative and part of your daily routine. This one is from Children's Ministry Network rep Lynn Storey.

**Laughter** is a great release for stress. What makes your child laugh? Being chased by the tickle monster? Watching funny videos? Reading funny stories? Making faces? Whatever it is, make time for it together.

**Music** brings a unique lifting of spirits. Every child will be different – some may like soothing music and others will prefer beltors they can sing along to. Why not make an anxiety play list? You can include some of their favourites from Sunday Club.



## ...and when apart

When we're anxious, we're not in the moment. Here's a breathing exercise that your child can do when they are not with you, that helps them focus on the now:

### **Star Breathing:**



Stretch your fingers out like a star. Using the pointing finger of your other hand trace along your star stretched fingers. Breathe in as you trace up to the tip, hold and then breathe out as you trace down to the palm. Keep going until you have traced all 5 fingers.

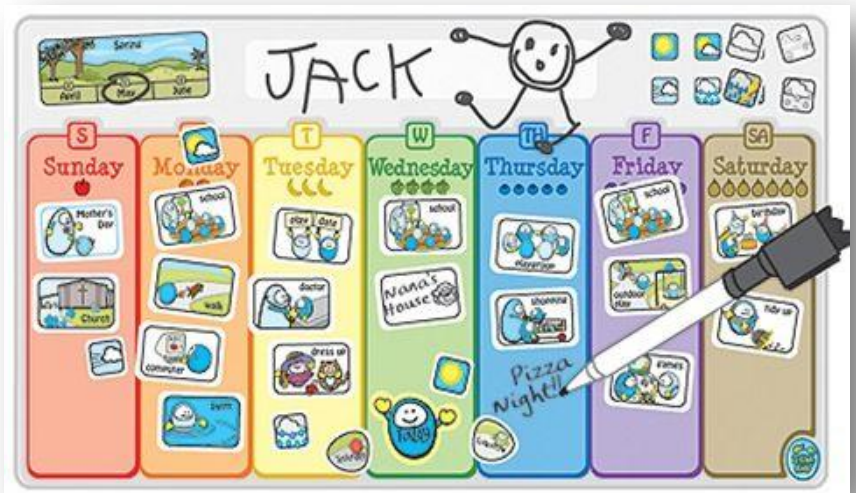
Do this exercise as many times as you need to. Remind yourself that God holds you in the palm of His hand.

**Body Grounding** – our bodies can hold anxiety. Practise planting your feet firmly on the ground, sitting up straight, feeling your hands on your lap and lifting your head up high. These simple acts force you to notice your body, to be present and to lift yourself

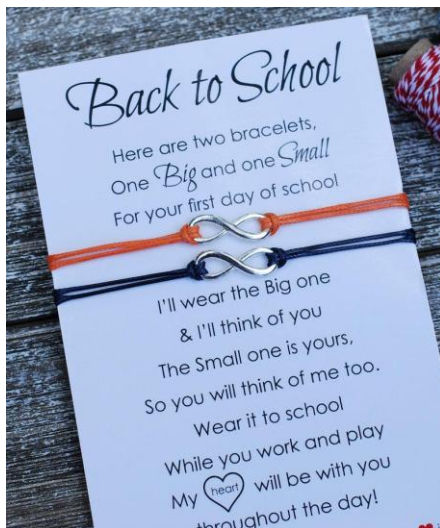
up. 'He puts my feet on solid ground, Psalm 40:2...He is the lifter of my head' Psalm 3:3 You can practise this at the kitchen table or out in the park with your bare feet in the grass.

## Tips for Reassurance

**Visuals:** Many schools and pre-schools already do this, but if not, why not request it for your child? Ask for pictures of what their new school will be like. This is where you take your shoes off, this is where you hang your coat and bag, you bring your lunchbox in here, the classroom looks like this, your desk looks like this, your teacher looks like this, the toilets are in here. Many people find these help with conversations during school term too because children can point to the pictures and tell stories of what happened in that place. As you point to each picture remind your child that Jesus is with you here, Jesus is going before you here, He has your back, He is you giving you strength.



You can also have visuals for your routine at home, such as a calendar on the fridge which may help children who are struggling to adjust to new routines.



**Comfort /Separation Bracelet:** we're unsure if this will be appropriate in school if it is visible and jewellery is not allowed but we are sharing in case it will work in your context.

You can make them and use three strands of wool/thread woven together to remind your child that as they work and play, you are praying for them, and united together in God's love. Amazing!

Together at Home have a great activity sheet for preparing children to go back to school – find it here [https://af51dd98-adab-4c43-ba03-c87e019551a5.filesusr.com/ugd/ebdd71\\_f339ff4387304aecba112bfb980a3a95.pdf](https://af51dd98-adab-4c43-ba03-c87e019551a5.filesusr.com/ugd/ebdd71_f339ff4387304aecba112bfb980a3a95.pdf)

Or what about a **Heart button** sewn inside their trouser pocket? When your child puts their hand in their pocket, they're reminded that you love them, that you're praying for them and that God is with them.



# 8 WAYS A CHILD'S ANXIETY SHOWS UP AS SOMETHING ELSE

## 1. Anger

The perception of danger, stress or opposition is enough to trigger the fight or flight response leaving your child angry and without a way to communicate why.



Chandeliering is when a seemingly calm person suddenly flies off the handle for no reason. They have pushed hurt and anxiety so deep for so long that a seemingly innocent comment or event suddenly sends them straight through the chandelier.



## 2. Difficulty Sleeping

In children, having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep is one of the hallmark characteristics of anxiety.



## 5. Lack of Focus

Children with anxiety are often so caught up in their own thoughts that they do not pay attention to what is going on around them.

FOCUS

## 6. Avoidance

Children who are trying to avoid a particular person, place or task often end up experiencing more of whatever it is they are avoiding.



## 7. Negativity

People with anxiety tend to experience negative thoughts at a much greater intensity than positive ones.

## 3. Defiance

Unable to communicate what is really going on, it is easy to interpret the child's defiance as a lack of discipline instead of an attempt to control a situation where they feel anxious and helpless.



## 8. Overplanning

Overplanning and defiance go hand in hand in their root cause. Where anxiety can cause some children to try to take back control through defiant behavior, it can cause others to overplan for situations where planning is minimal or unnecessary.



As adults we behave in these ways too. Being kind and curious about out of character behaviour applies to how we treat ourselves as much as how we treat others. Why not draw your feelings with your child – there's a nifty template here: <https://www.barnardos.ie/media/8669/draw-your-own-feelings-card-template.pdf> Then remind yourselves of how God sees you and how that doesn't change no matter how you're feeling or behaving.



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