

Supporting your anxious child during COVID-19.



PRAISE PRAISE PRAISE – make sure that you are giving your child lots of praise for all the great things that they are doing each day. Don't take any behaviour for granted and praise the small steps. Praise increases your child's self-esteem and confidence, all the more important for anxious children. By making sure you give **Specific Labelled Praise**, your child will know exactly what behaviour they have done well and they are more likely to repeat it.

“Well done for playing in your room by yourself, you are being so independent”

“Thank you so much for coming off your game so quickly, that was really helpful”

“Wow you did that all by yourself! You are growing up so much”

Coach their independence - this means noticing when they are being the teeniest bit independent and commenting on it. For anxious children, part of being brave is knowing that you can do things for yourself. Highlighting any moment that your child is being independent will help them to develop this skill. When you use sentences starting with “you are...” that is translated in our brains as “I am...” and eventually this then results in “I can...”. For anxious children we want them to develop their inner voice to say “I can be brave/ I can do this/ I can give this a try”

“You are doing that all by yourself”

“You are being such a big boy”

“You are so independent now, it's amazing”



Emotion coaching helps children to understand their emotions along with their positive coping strategies. Emotions are tricky and confusing, they impact on how our body feels. There are many adults who find it difficult to decipher one emotion from another, let alone children. There's often no point in asking 'what's the matter?' or 'how are you feeling?' because children often don't know. By simply labelling the emotion you can see (you might not always get this right, don't worry) will help children to understand the word that describes the feeling. If that feeling is a difficult emotion such as worried, scared or frustrated, then it's important for us to also label how they are positively coping with that emotion. By labelling the positive coping strategy, we are focusing the child's attention on it and setting them up to use it again and again. It's okay to be scared but I am also brave.



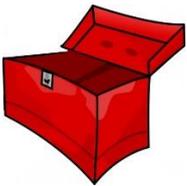
“I can see you look really worried today but you are doing a great job at being brave and trying to distract yourself”

VAN – **Validate** their worry, **Acknowledge** their emotion, **Normalise** it. When we get told “don’t be silly” or “there’s no need to worry” it is not helpful to the situation and devalues what that person is feeling. By showing that you are really really listening helps to contain these emotions. Your anxious child is a jug of water that is overflowing, the way to help them is to empty some of their water into your jug so that they are best able to manage that water. Using the VAN helps to empty some of that water.

“I know you find this scary and difficult, it’s all very different to what you are used to. I feel worried and confused about all this at times too. What can we do together to distract ourselves for a little while?”



Introduce a ‘worry box’ and add it into their daily routine. Giving children a daily opportunity to draw or write their current worry can be helpful in you being able to contain these emotions for them. They can add them in throughout the day. Take your allocated time to talk about each worry with them, if necessary allocate them to a person in order to try and minimise your child’s ownership on issues that they don’t need to. Try not to do this at bedtime as it can disrupt their sleep. Late afternoon is more helpful as it then gives you time to follow this with a fun distraction. You could also create a ‘coping box’ full of fiddle toys or self care items that you child can access to help sooth them when anxiety is starting to get the better of them.



“Mum isn’t in work but we can give that worry to her, and Dad’s job is to worry about Grandma’s shopping. So what do we have left?”

Create a basic timetable for your child’s day. Keep it as close to their usual day as possible e.g. lunchtime / dinnertime/ bedtime routine. This will help them feel secure in knowledge of what is going to happen each day, particularly important for all of us when the world feels uncertain.



Limit access to the news or social media. There is so much on the news/ radio/ online right now that both real and fake news can add fuel to your child’s anxious fire. Anxious children will want lots of information about what’s going on and ask you lots of questions. Try to keep calm no matter how irritating this may be. Add in time each day for them to watch age appropriate news such as CBBC Newsround, thereby ensure they get correct and age appropriate information. Watch it with them to show that you are also interested.



Games such as Hide and Seek can be really useful for anxious children as it gives them rules and structure to scaffold a potentially anxiety of being away from you. For children who worry about their parents forgetting them it give a safe experience to manage difficult emotions in bite sized pieces. Don't be surprised if your child is the one who wants to do the seeking, this is normal. If they do go and hide, make sure you start out by finding them quickly, then eventually start to drag it out a little longer. For preschool children peekaboo style games with a scarf, blanket or cushion helps children to experience that what goes away also comes back.



Messy play is a fun way of helping children to learn to 'have a go'. Those children who are encouraged to engage in messy play are more confident and more willing to try new things. Those children who are often told 'no', 'not too much', 'not like that' are often more wary of trying new things for fear of getting it wrong or upsetting their parents by messing their clothes. Messy play is great because there is no 'right' way of doing it. Let them explore at their own pace and coach their independence. Chuck on some old clothes and get messy with them. This could involve dry or wet messy play – using your finger to draw pictures in a plate of dry rice, squishing cold beans between your toes or simply getting the paints out and encouraging their creativity can all be helpful for anxious children. Don't forget to laugh if it gets on the floor, it can easily be cleaned up.

Remember, overcoming anxieties or developing bravery is a very gradual process, if you push your child too quickly they may become even more scared. This about where your child is now, where you want them to be and what are the steps in between?

E.g. For a child who is scared to go in their own room, the end goal may be for them to sleep in their own bed. However there may be numerous steps in between: a) walking in and out of bedroom with parent to get a toy b) playing in bedroom for a minute or two with parent c) being able to get a toy out of their room alone whilst parent stands outside d) being able to go upstairs and get a toy alone e) play for a short time alone in bedroom with parent upstairs f) extending playtime in bedroom alone g) having bedtime routine in bedroom but sleeping in parents bed h) sleep in own bed with parent present until fast asleep but may still come in parents bed in the night i) fall asleep in own bed without parents present j) learn to stay in own bed throughout the night.

School refusal

For those anxious child who previously refused to go to school, staying at home during the current climate will be playing right into their hands. However, it will not be helping their anxieties in separating from you in the long run. With this in mind, it will be useful to set up situations at home whereby you can practice a separation routine which you can then continue when the schools reopen. Situations where your child will be playing in another room from you, or if you need to go to the shop for essential items are perfect for helping your child to manage low level anxiety caused by small separations.

1. Take your child to where you want them to be e.g. in their bedroom.

2. Tell your child what is going to happen ***“I’m going to tidy the kitchen, you stay in your room and play with ...”***
3. How long will you be away for? ***“I’m going to come back and check on you in 5 minutes”*** (or just 1 minute depending on your child’s anxiety)
4. Acknowledge any difficult emotions (if present) but set them up to succeed ***“I know you’re not keen on me leaving you, but I know you are brilliant at playing on your own for a few minutes”***
5. Let them know what you’ll do together when you return ***“When I come back we can play your game together ”***
6. Make sure you go back after the time you say (time it on your watch)
7. When you return tell them how independent and brave they have been, along with a big cuddle. ***“Thank you so much for playing up here by yourself, you’ve been such a great help to me”*** or ***“Wow you were so brave playing without me! Well done, that seemed to be really easy for you.”***
8. If this is still too distressing for your child, don’t force them or make them by shutting the door. Go back up to the previous suggestion of using games such as hide and seek.
9. This can be adapted to any age of child or teenager. The process will remain the same but your wording will be more age appropriate.