



**Anna Freud**  
National Centre for  
Children and Families

# Helping children and young people to manage anxiety

*A practical guide to supporting  
pupils and students during  
periods of disruption*



Disruption is always difficult, and the last five weeks have seen people having to embrace greater change than any time in living memory. The initial shock of the current situation may appear to have settled, but much remains unknown.

Although this is a new situation, we can draw on the existing evidence base to think about how we can support children and young people. In this document we will look at how to support children and young people's mental health with a focus on anxiety.

We have included [materials about self-care and its evidence base](#), as well as [some tips based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy \(CBT\)](#). In doing so we hope that we can offer you some materials to share with children, young people and families, as well as share some suggestions for you to apply to your work with your pupils and students.

Working from home brings with it new relationships between schools and parents. The material in this document is written with two aims in mind: to support teachers working remotely with children; and second, to provide materials for teachers to support parents who are playing a more significant role than ever in their child's education at a challenging time.

### Evidence base

Recent research tells us, unsurprisingly, that young people are under increased stress and are experiencing elevated levels of anxiety as a result of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Some children who may be vulnerable or at risk may be particularly prone to anxiety. Children and young people may have lost access to the previous support they received via schools, peer support groups and counselling.<sup>2</sup> Based on the research evidence, we have also compiled a document on self-management strategies for children and young people coping with [anxiety](#).

As teachers and school leaders, there are several things you can do to support children and young people who may be feeling anxious at this time.



The principles below could be shared with parents, carers and staff that are still teaching on site, and we hope this will also be a useful resource for teachers working virtually. The individual child, their family and circumstances should be taken into account when implementing any of these principles, as there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

The headlines below are informed by a CBT-based approach and, if you consider them useful, can be shared with parents and carers.

## 1. Be open and be available

Demonstrate that you are available to talk but without forcing the conversation at a particular time. Children and young people may be experiencing fear and anxiety from a range of sources. They may be worried about a grandparent, or catching the virus themselves, and they may express this in a variety of ways. Talking about what is happening in a child-friendly and age appropriate way, and helping children to find positive ways of expressing their fears<sup>3</sup> (e.g. A creative activity) can help reduce fears in younger children, as in, for example, [Coronavirus – a book for children](#). Avoiding talking about the current situation can add to their fears.

## 2. Consistency and routine

Sometimes words like 'consistency' and 'routine' can sound dull or disciplinarian. What we're really talking about is establishing and maintaining healthy habits. Whatever words we use, these regular patterns of behaviour are really important for children and young people and help them feel safe and contained.<sup>4,5</sup> These routines or healthy habits may take the form of a visual plan for the week, or a checklist of things to do to help children and young people to structure their day and manage their time. Other examples may include going on a walk each day or taking five minutes to plan an activity. Working with young people to develop their own plan is often a good way of getting the best results.

However, developing consistency can be a particular challenge for some children and young people especially in the current circumstances. Some teenagers, for example, may be more resistant to advice. If a young person isn't responding to or resists routine, be consistent, stay calm and keep the dialogue open. Supportive relationships are important in managing anxiety and gentle persuasion has more chance of working than conflict. Try to avoid escalating conflict when tensions are rising, remove yourself from the situation and return to the issue when everyone feels calmer and more receptive to addressing it.

## 3. Encourage problem solving

Children with anxiety often feel overwhelmed and will inevitably need some reassurance at this time. However, it is important for children to try to problem solve for themselves as problem solving can reduce the impact of stressful life events on anxiety.<sup>6</sup> Rather than always simply offering reassurance, try responding to their questions with another question. For example, 'I know you are worried about us getting sick, but what are the things we are doing to keep ourselves safe?' This can help break what may seem like a larger problem down into smaller, more manageable problems that have more clearly identifiable solutions.

## 4. Work together

Teachers and school leaders can model positive ways of managing anxiety, both in the classroom or remotely.<sup>7</sup> This can be reinforced by parents and carers at home. Receiving positive information and modelling calm can help to reduce fears.<sup>8</sup> Exploring ideas together around 'what helps me to feel calm?' will enable children themselves to come up with what works best for them. [Breathing exercises](#) are a good place to start.

## 5. Maintain a healthy balance

Encourage children and young people to make time to engage with friends remotely. Remind young people of the value of allocating 'down-time' to their routine. Encourage them to do things they enjoy, such as art, listening to music, physical exercise<sup>9</sup> (within the constraints of lockdown), and going for a walk as part of their daily exercise. Some pupils might need to be reminded that along with keeping up with their schoolwork, this is an important part in maintaining a healthy balance to their day and will help them sustain their relationships. For younger children play in particular is important during this time as it can help children manage complex emotions.<sup>10</sup>



## 6. Look to the future

It is important to validate and acknowledge difficult feelings around missed opportunities and [disappointments](#). But it can also be helpful to engage young people in conversations about what they are looking forward to getting back. This message of hope about the future is important to all of us at this time, and young people are no exception.<sup>11</sup> Remind them that this time will pass.

## 7. Provide a sense of agency

Give pupils the opportunity to feed back to the school regularly on their experiences, including what has been going well and what has not gone so well. Agency can help children and young people build up their self-identity and feel a sense of control, which is particularly important during stressful and uncertain times.<sup>12</sup> If children and young people feel they have a valued contribution to play in their own lives, they are more likely to perform better. If they don't, there is a risk they won't comply and may resent well-meaning efforts to support them.

### More about Schools in Mind

Schools in Mind is a free network for staff working in schools and colleges, and allied professionals which shares practical, academic and clinical expertise regarding the wellbeing and mental health issues that affect schools. [Join us here](#).



### Additional resources

[Self-care resources](#), Anna Freud Centre. Aimed at young people aged 12+.

[Talking Mental Health](#), Anna Freud Centre. Animation and toolkit aimed at 9- to 11-year-olds.

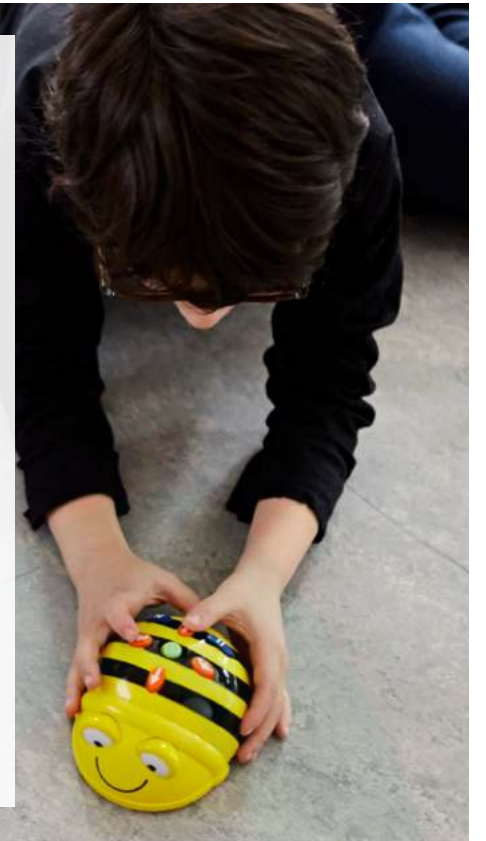
[We All Have Mental Health](#), Anna Freud Centre. Animation and toolkit aimed at 11- to 14-year-olds.

[Coronavirus: anxiety toolkit](#), Anna Freud Centre's Mentally Healthy Schools site. Aimed at primary schools.

[Coping with stress during coronavirus](#), Scottish Association of Mental Health. Aimed at children and young people of all ages.

[Relaxation exercises](#), Young Scot. Aimed at children and young people of all ages.

[Guided meditation videos](#), Headspace. Aimed at older children and adults.



<sup>1</sup> YoungMinds. Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs. (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Lee, J. Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19. Lancet. Child Adolesc. Heal. 2019, 30109 (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Dalton, L., Rapa, E. & Stein, A. Protecting the psychological health of children through effective communication about COVID-19. The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health (2020) doi:10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30097-3.

<sup>4</sup> Markson, S. & Fiese, B. H. Family Rituals as a Protective Factor for Children With Asthma. J. Pediatr. Psychol. (2000) doi:10.1093/jpepsy/25.7.471.

<sup>5</sup> Spagnola, M. & Fiese, B. H. Family Routines and Rituals. Infants Young Child. (2007) doi:10.1097/01.iyc.0000290352.32170.5a.

<sup>6</sup> Nezu, A. M. Negative life stress and anxiety: Problem solving as a moderator variable. Psychol. Rep. (1986) doi:10.2466/pr0.1986.58.1.279.

<sup>7</sup> Bandura, A. Social learning theory. (Prentice Hall, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Kelly, V. L., Barker, H., Field, A. P., Wilson, C. & Reynolds, S. Can Rachman's indirect pathways be used to un-learn fear? A prospective paradigm to test whether children's fears can be reduced using positive information and modelling a non-anxious response. Behav. Res. Ther. (2010) doi:10.1016/j.brat.2009.10.002.

<sup>9</sup> Biddle, S. J. H. & Asare, M. Physical activity and mental health in children and adolescents: A review of reviews. British Journal of Sports Medicine (2011) doi:10.1136/bjsports-2011-090185.

<sup>10</sup> Ramchandani, P. G. Covid-19: we can ward off

some of the negative impacts on children. New Scientist (2020).

<sup>11</sup> Folkman, S. Stress, coping, and hope. in Psychological Aspects of Cancer: A Guide to Emotional and Psychological Consequences of Cancer, Their Causes and Their Management (2014). doi:10.1007/978-1-4614-4866-2\_8.

<sup>12</sup> Zimmerman, B. & Cleary, T. Adolescents' development of personal agency: The role of self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulatory skill.. in Self-efficacy beliefs of adolescents (ed. Pajares, F Urdan, T.) 45–70 (Information Age Publishing, 2006).

### Finding support

Samaritans: 116 123 / [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)

Childline: 0800 1111 / [childline.org.uk](https://www.childline.org.uk)

Youth Wellbeing Directory: [youthwellbeing.co.uk](https://youthwellbeing.co.uk)

Details on how to find urgent help are available here: [annafreud.org/urgenthelp](https://annafreud.org/urgenthelp)



## About us

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 65 years. Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment. We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

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