



# Do we worry too much about our children who worry?

Children with anxiety see the world as a scary place. As parents we can be scared and worried about the impact this may have on their lives. Anxious children can be overly sensitive to their feelings and lack confidence in their own ability. This can lead to parents doubting their own capacity to help.

Anxious children try to avoid situations they see as difficult. This can result in parents becoming “enablers” as they want to avoid causing their children pain. Overprotectiveness can inadvertently encourage children to avoid situations they feel anxious about so everyday challenges at home and school become increasingly difficult.

Experiencing fear and worries are normal childhood experiences that most children will learn to manage with the help of their families. For about 7-9% of children in Australia, this process is trickier as their anxiety is more frequent, intense and impacts on their ability to do things other children their age can do. These children tend to misidentify threat or danger, or perceive it to be much greater than it actually is.

Anxiety can lead to sleeplessness, diarrhoea, tummy pains, headaches, irritability, difficulty concentrating and tiredness. Parents can struggle to work out whether their children are physically sick and are often surprised to learn that they are actually expressing their worries through their bodies.

Parents frequently ask how they can help their child. It is helpful to remember anxiety is a feeling and, like all feelings, the first step is helping your child to identify when they feel anxious. Being able to express how anxiety affects them, with your support, can in and of itself settle anxious feelings.

Children will be interested in how you manage to settle your own anxious feelings rather than just being told how they might settle their own. Can you describe your own ways of talking yourself through a difficult situation and being

brave? If you can, it is a powerful model of helpful thinking. If you can help your children to accept that anxious feelings are a part of life, particularly when you try something new, this can help reduce their fear of feeling anxious. Accepting and being curious about anxious feelings can encourage children to keep trying in spite of them, which gradually builds their confidence.

One of the hardest things for parents is to discourage avoidance of anxiety provoking situations whilst being careful not to fall into the trap of pushing too hard or of taking over. Children build strength and resilience by learning to face challenges. But it is vital to begin with small challenges that are gradually introduced, with emphasis being on celebrating trying rather than success. Children can often choose their own goals for becoming braver and take small steps towards achieving them.

If anxiety persists, avoidance is settling in, or if you feel your child or your relationship with your child is suffering, do seek help early. Families should always be involved in treatment, and strategies should include school if this is a source of a child's worries.

There is considerable evidence for the effectiveness of psychological treatments at reducing symptoms and preventing later difficulties. Most families regret delaying, saying that they waited too long to get help due to worrying about the worry! If this is the case, break the worry cycle and model getting effective help for your child. Being able to know when to ask for help, and being active in finding solutions to difficulties is a wonderful life skill for a child to learn from their parents.



**Caroline Goossens** is a Child Psychiatrist, and has worked in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service for over 25 years. She and her team have collaborated with Perth Children's Hospital Foundation on the development of The Big Splash WA, and have written the content of The Big Splash WA Schools Program Resource Kits.