Anxiety and Worry in Children

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness or a rapid heartbeat.

Worry is the cognitive component of anxiety. It is the thoughts that go round and round your head without resolving. Although worry in adults and older adolescents feels less intense and not as bad as a fear response, in primary aged children, especially the younger ones, this isn’t true. Worries feel as bad as fear and anxiety.

relevant models

Attachment: secure base and support for exploration

General model of anxiety:

Anxiety = Likelihood of threat x Severity of threat

Copingskills + Support offered

Anxiety in the classroom

Avoidance of work, friendships, challenges
- Withdrawal from activities
- Acting out

Problems with transitions
- Absences
- Late attendance

Reassurance seeking
- Panic attacks
- Worry

What stops a classroom from becoming a secure base?

- Bullying
- Being excluded or made to feel different
- Feeling pressured to be the same as others
- Failing (expectations or competition)
- Belittling, singling out, or humiliation
- Stressed teachers

What can you do?...

Reduce threat

1. Identifying threat....
   - Getting things wrong
   - Learning overwhelmed
   - Sensory/perceptual issues
   - Speaking in public
   - Being rejected

2. Identify the behaviour you want to support, offer praise and rewards for small steps towards that goal

Support children’s coping skills

- Set limits round anxious behaviours including avoidance or withdrawal
- Manage your own reassurance seeking
- Reinforce efforts at coping
- Encourage children to take the next (small) step

Supporting parents

Believe them and validate their experience of their child
- Identify and reduce the threat for the parent
- Maintain communication
- Develop parental coping skills (same as for children)
- Work with parents to create strategies at home and at school