

# Working with anxious parents



Many anxious children will have an anxious parent.<sup>1</sup> Children with anxious parents may lack role modelling in productive coping skills and rational ways of thinking. Teachers can model such skills to both the child and their parent/s and provide appropriate risk-taking and resilience building opportunities.

Work within your skill level, confidence and comfort zone to support the child and parents.

- **Where possible work collaboratively with the child's parents.** One or two small changes at home may help to reduce anxiety. Remember, parents generally have a right to know whatever the school knows about their child. Note: Exemptions may occur when a parent is a perpetrator of harm or abuse.
- **When talking with parents ensure they do not feel judged** or that they are being told what to do. It may help to talk in general terms. For example, 'at this level parents usually need to reassess a range of issues such as the importance of balance and down time in their child's life; not overcommitting to extracurricular activities, not placing excessive pressure on their child, and monitoring online activity and electronic games'.
- **Assist parents and children to use assertive communication to help keep things in perspective.** This reduces stress by helping them feel more in control of a situation, as their feelings and wants are clearly communicated. The use of anxious communication with a child such as, 'Be careful at school camp!' can lead the parent and child to feel panicky and out of control. Use assertive language to explain the behaviours expected. For example, 'Remember, stay in the camp area', 'Use two hands and two feet on adventure equipment', 'Walk around the swimming pool.' Assertive communication reminds us we can keep safe by following sensible rules and using common sense.

For more tips read [Negotiation and assertiveness techniques with parents](#) in the Psych4Schools Member's area.

If the parent displays high levels of anxiety, you might:

- **Build effective communication channels with parents.** Regular communication can help to reduce anxiety. Set explicit boundaries and expectations about your preferred regularity and forms of communication. For example, you might agree to email parents once a week on a Thursday to update them on their child's progress in confidently reading aloud, with a meeting twice a term to revise goals and discuss any concerns.  
See [Working with parents who are overprotective \(helicopter parents\) ebooklet](#) for tips on effective meetings.
- **Make it clear you do not engage in email ping-pong.** Explain that some conversations are appropriate via email, while others are more appropriate as face-to-face exchanges, by appointment, with you and/or more senior staff members.
- **Seek additional support** from the Wellbeing Coordinator, Assistant or Deputy Principal.
- **Look after yourself.** Working with anxious children and their families can be overwhelming and anxiety provoking. Actively take time out. The ebooklet [Looking after yourself](#) offers strategies.

Provide resources to anxious parents who wish to help themselves and their child to relieve their own and/or their child's worry or anxiety. The following two ebooklets located on the Psych4Schools website in the Working with Parents section can be provided to support parents:

- **[For parents: Reduce your stress and worry.](#)** Children watch how their parents cope with everything from small everyday hassles to major stressful events. They will often copy their parents' behaviour. While it is difficult to stay in control all the time, the better parents are at

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<sup>1</sup> Rapee, R.M., Wignall, A., Hudson, J.L., and Schniering, C.A., (2000) Treating anxious children and adolescents: An evidence-based approach. New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, USA



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actively using strategies that help them to manage their emotions and stay calm, the more likely their children will be able to regulate their responses to worries or stressful situations.

- **For parents: Assist your child with stress and worry.** Children cope best with worries when they are reassured, informed, see challenging tasks as achievable, and understand that success usually involves sustained effort. Parents can use suggested strategies to assist their child to resolve worries, face challenges and fears, solve problems, put worries in perspective, and ensure their child is well rested, healthy and feels safe.
- **Link parents with psychologists, school counsellors and senior school staff** who can further discuss suggestions and strategies for home.

**For immediate help or information:**

Call **Lifeline** 131 114, or visit [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)

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