

Working with  
**children**

who worry excessively



Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

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## Children who worry excessively

A recent Australian study revealed that the top two things children worry about are friends and family dying, and the environment<sup>1</sup>. Other top worries include family issues, concerns about physical appearance, losing or keeping friends, homework pressures, the future, doing tests or assignments, pets dying, not having enough time to do things, and school.

All children worry sometimes. When children worry they focus on what will happen if things go wrong at a future event, such as failing a test or a parent dying. Some children also worry about what they have said or done in the past, such as an argument with a parent or sibling.

Worry that primes positive action, such as practising for a test or learning to cope with a challenging situation, is healthy. Worrying, however, can become a problem when it is frequent or excessive or when it consumes all thoughts or overwhelms the child's emotional resources.

### Behaviours of children who excessively worry

Children who worry excessively may:

- seek reassurance from others while contending nothing is wrong
- ask if their answer is correct or incorrect
- present with a worried expression on their face
- bite the skin on their fingers or fingernails
- twirl their hair around their fingers
- procrastinate and be slow to engage in activities
- watch others in the room and have closed body language.

### Negative impact of worrying excessively

The negative impacts of excessive worrying on a child can include:

- difficulty sleeping
- difficulty concentrating in class
- fidgeting
- being overly anxious to please
- neediness and dependence on others
- tearfulness
- wanting to 'mother' other students

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<sup>1</sup> (2007, no author) 'Behind the news surveys Australian children and asks what they worry about' sourced from [www.abc.net.au/tv/btn/teachers/.../0227finalBTNpress%20kit.pdf](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/btn/teachers/.../0227finalBTNpress%20kit.pdf)



- avoidance of activities
- irritability
- withdrawing from social, family or school activities
- frequent school absences
- increased susceptibility to illness or feeling sick
- difficulty starting and completing class work
- decreased academic grades.

### When to seek further assistance

Worrying becomes a problem when it begins to impact negatively on the child's life. Children's worries should be taken seriously. Short discussions can often dispel typical everyday concerns of children and help to prevent the development of excessive, escalating or ongoing worry.

If a satisfactory solution cannot be found with the child, the teacher should discuss these concerns with a senior person in the school such as the principal. The teacher should also talk with the child's parents with a view to suggesting the child be referred to a psychologist or counsellor. Without effective intervention, ongoing worrying can become an anxiety condition.

Referral to a psychologist or counsellor with the parents' consent, may be required if the child:

- is worried daily about many little issues
- has worries that appear to be escalating
- has worries that are disproportionate to the circumstances
- indicates a recurring theme to their worries
- has headaches or feels sick
- is frequently absent from school
- has mood changes
- is generally well behaved but seems withdrawn or anxious.



## Strategies to support the child who worries excessively

Children cope best with worries when they are reassured, informed and proactive.

- **Acknowledge the child's worries.** Listen to the child's concerns. What are they? Are they something you can assist with? Ask the child if they have discussed the concern with their parents or another trusted adult and, if they haven't, encourage the child to talk to their parents or a senior staff member such as the welfare coordinator or the deputy or assistant principal.
  - Do not dismiss the child's worries. Using statements such as 'Don't worry about it, it'll be fine' or 'That is not going to happen to you' are unlikely to reduce the child's worries and are likely to add to their inner confusion.
- **If the child cannot express their worries verbally,** create opportunities for developmental and imaginative play. The child may not have a good understanding about the source or cause of the worry. Young children may not be able to articulate or make sense of their worries. If this is the case, provide opportunities for the child to express themselves through creative play, art, music, dress-ups and dance. Non-verbal activities can help the child explore and share emotions that are troubling them. Using play-dough, finger painting, water play and other tactile activities can help a child express their worries and can soothe and sometimes help to relieve these feelings.
- **Put the child's worry in perspective.** You can do this in the following ways:
  - **Answer the child's questions as clearly and honestly as you can.** The child may not have a good understanding about the cause of the worry. For some, clear, reliable information about the concern can reduce their worrying. For example, the child may worry that their mother will die because she has started taking medication for diabetes. If the child needs more factual information about the concern or has incorrect information, talk with the parents and senior school staff to ensure the child is provided with correct, age-appropriate information.
  - **Alternatively, as appropriate, ask the child about the extent of the problem,** as a means to reduce the worry. Use the following steps:
    1. **Is the worry a 'big' problem or a 'little' problem?** Help the child to realistically consider whether the worry is actually only 'annoying' or 'a little bit upsetting' rather than the 'worst worry ever possible'.
    2. **Rate the worry from 1 to 10,** where one is 'not a worry' and 10 is the 'worst worry ever possible'. Use a worry thermometer like the one on the next page to illustrate the concept. Then ask, 'What would it take for the worry to be one or two points less?' Discuss the child's response, and develop a plan to carry out appropriate actions to reduce the worry.
    3. **Ask, 'What is the best and worst thing that could happen in this situation?'** Then ask, 'How likely is it that the worst will ever happen?' Help the child to adjust any faulty thinking or predictions about future 'bad' outcomes. Then ask, 'What is the most likely thing that will happen?' Once this has been identified, you can help the child plan to cope with the most likely outcome using the strategies below.



### Coping strategies to assist the child who worries excessively







- **Help the child to develop a coping plan.** The intensity of a child's anxiety will be reduced if they have identified ways to cope, should a problem occur. For example, if the child is worried that a friend will never talk to them again, brainstorm and list coping strategies with the child that could help if it were to happen. For example, these strategies might include, 'play with my buddy or someone else', 'ask the yard duty teacher to help me think of something else to do', or 'continue to be nice to my friend, even if she doesn't want to play with me at the moment'. Ensure the child lists at least two coping strategies. Children cope best with worries when they have a plan.
- **Assist the child to become proactive.** Some children worry about issues and outcomes beyond any control, such as a natural disaster. Help the child list ways to prevent negative outcomes. For example, a child may worry that there will be no water because of a drought or as a result of global warming. In this case, the list may include: have three minute showers, collect water with a bucket while showering and washing hands in the sink, use collected water on the garden or to flush the toilet; ask parents to get low-flow showerheads at home; present a talk to the class on water saving; speak to the principal about fixing leaking taps at the school; or write an article for the school newsletter informing people about water-saving strategies. Class activities could be sensitive to children's concerns.
- **Start the day well by leaving worries on the 'worry tree'.** Any worries the child might bring to school can be left on a branch of the 'worry tree'—a designated tree in or near the school grounds where worries are left while the child is at school. The child can work towards leaving the 'worries' on the tree all the time.
- **Make a 'worry box'.** Have the child make and decorate a worry box using an old shoebox. Ask the child to list their worries and to place them in the box. The box is then placed somewhere where it won't bother the child, such as in the deputy or assistant principal's office or under the teacher's desk at school. The child can add worries to the box, as needed. The teacher should monitor these worries as a means of providing ideas to assist the child in coping (see below) and as a duty of care to help ensure additional support is given.
- **Restrict or limit worrying.** Suggest to the child that it might help to set 5-10 minutes for worrying at a particular time each day. At this time, the child can discuss their worry with an adult or write a worry journal. When necessary, remind the child that it is not yet 'worry time' or 'worry time is at 3 o'clock'. If 'worry time' is set in the late afternoon, help the child to finish the day with a positive thought once 'worry time' is over.




- **If the child is worried outside the designated worry time**, ask them to list the worry in the 'worry book' and to then put the book and the thoughts aside until the next designated worry time. An exercise book can be created solely for this purpose.
- **Provide an alternative activity, such as quiet reading**, so the child realises that this is not the time for worrying. If the child feels worried at this time, allow them to sit away from regular classroom distractions and record the worry in a 'worry book'.
- **Use the child's 'worry book' or 'worry box' to review the child's worries.** Ask the child to place the worries in categories (e.g. home, school, general worries) and in order of significance, if possible. If the child does not get along with others at school, is worried about others being unkind or teasing them, or is anxious about tests, then brainstorm or suggest strategies that the child might like to try. If the issues are related to home, such as arguments with a sibling or missing a parent who is away for an extended period, once again brainstorm approaches the child might employ.
- **Use De Bono's six thinking hats.** Draw a sheet or use a worksheet with six thinking hats such as the one on the next page. Write or use a suitable corresponding descriptor for each hat. The child can write a worry to match the thinking hat. Review the worry with the child and help shift their thinking to a more positive hat. See the Psych4Schools website for a copy of the 'Thinking hats worry worksheet'.

### Thinking hats worry worksheet

This sheet is based on deBono's 6 thinking hats to help you understand a problem better, and to find a way to cope with it. An example has been given by a child who is worried about failing a spelling test. Fill in the 'The worry' box with your worry.

Hat	Type	The worry: I will fail a spelling test
 White Hat	Facts	e.g. My worry is I have a 'big' spelling test on Friday.
 Red Hat	Feelings	e.g. I feel scared, worried and a bit angry.
 Black Hat	Serious thoughts	e.g. Is there a weakness in the way I think and worry?
 Yellow Hat	Positive thoughts	e.g. I can learn the really 'hard' words before the test.
 Green Hat	New possible idea	e.g. If I learn 5 words a night I'll know them all by Friday.
 Blue Hat	Thinking about my thinking	e.g. I can use yellow or green hat thinking to reduce my worry.


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## Whole-class coping activities

The following are suggested coping activities that can be used with the whole class.

- **Physical exercise.** Incorporating exercise or physical activities into your daily program with the class will help distract the child from their worries. Exercise also releases endorphins, which assist the child to feel good. Getting plenty of exercise can also make it easier for the child to fall asleep at night, rather than worrying in bed. Good sleep aids concentration and well-being.
- **Teach your whole class relaxation exercises.** Relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation or guided visualisation can help a child to control physical manifestations of worry, such as rapid, shallow breathing and muscle tension. Encourage children to use these techniques when they feel worried or anxious. Immediately after lunch is a good time to use relaxation techniques in the classroom to help children refocus on the afternoon's activities. See the Psych4Schools website for relaxation activities.
- **Create a class project to tackle a common worry at your school.** Many children worry about the environment and global warming. Help children to feel they can make a difference and gain some control by working with your class to create a whole-school approach to the issue through recycling, vegetable growing, water saving, waste reduction or other programs. Other ideas include homework assignments related to reducing the family's electricity use, water consumption or waste production.
- **Establish and enforce respect in the classroom.** Class members should respect one another's rights to speak and to respectfully disagree with each other. As the classroom becomes a safe place for speaking and listening, typical worries can be introduced and discussed in a non-threatening, problem-solving way. These discussions can be held during mat time, circle time or home room sessions. This activity also helps build peer acceptance.
- **Read stories about children who overcome fears or worries.** Discuss the storyline with your class. Identify how the child in the book overcame their worry and ask for examples from children who have solved similar problems.
- **Make a class book, 'Rebounding'.** Talk with the class about small problems they have confronted and strategies they have used to help deal with them. Have children write a story about a small problem and how they coped with it. Teachers will need to monitor these stories to ensure that each one is not overly confronting, does not name anyone in a libelous way, and has a positive outcome or useful strategies. Remind the class that the stories will be read by parents and other students so names and identifying information need to be changed. If the teacher is concerned about a child's story, they should discuss it with a senior staff member such as the principal.





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## Resources

### Picture Story Books

- Virginia Ironside (2004). *The huge bag of worries*. Hodder Children's Books, England.
- Nicky Johnston (2008). *Go away Mr Worrythoughts*. Nicky's Art, Langwarrin, Australia.
- Nicky Johnston (2009). *Happy thoughts are everywhere*. Nicky's Art, Langwarrin, Australia.

### Books for middle primary children and junior secondary

- Dawn Huebner (2005). *What to do when you worry too much: A kid's guide to overcoming anxiety*. Magination Press. American Psychological Association, Washington, USA.
- James Crist (2004). *What to do when you're scared and worried*. Free Spirit Publishing. Minneapolis, USA.

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