

Understanding Feelings of Anxiety in Early Childhood: Cues and Supports



Child's name:

Months/ Years old:

All children will experience moments when they feel worried, scared or unsure as part of their learning and development. For young children, these feelings of anxiety usually show up through changes in their behaviour. They might occur when something in their environment is unexpected, new, or upsetting. If worries, fears, or uncertainties are frequent or big, they can affect wellbeing and participation.

This form includes questions about anxiety cues and calming strategies. Families and educators can use it together to understand a child's cues and better support their learning, wellbeing, and participation. When developmentally appropriate, involving the child can help them build trust and confidence in asking for help when they feel anxious.

The cues listed below reflect experiences across a range of ages and developmental levels. Cues presented earlier in the list may be more common in infants and toddlers, while cues listed later are often noticed in older children. It is important to keep in mind that anxiety looks different for every child and there are no strict age limits. An older child with higher support needs may show cues that are more typical of infants and toddlers, while a toddler may have communication strengths that allow them to express their feelings earlier than many of their peers. Each child's cues can be understood and supported through strong, responsive partnerships.

When is feeling worried, scared, or unsure, we may notice changes that affect their wellbeing, participation, learning, and interactions with others. We might see changes in:

Their body

Tick all that apply.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Widening eyes | ☐ Avoiding eye contact |
| ☐ More frequent crying | ☐ Tense or trembling |
| ☐ Sore tummy | ☐ Headaches |

Their daily life

Tick all that apply.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Loss of speech or reluctance to speak in some settings | ☐ Reduced continence in children where this was well established |
| ☐ Changes in sleep | ☐ Use of a younger-sounding voice |
| ☐ Changes in appetite, feeding, or eating | ☐ Not wanting to participate in activities they normally would |

How they respond

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Clinging to trusted adults
- ☐ Soothing behaviours that occur more often than usual or at unexpected times. Rocking, thumb-sucking, chewing on clothes, seeking comfort items or close contact, nail biting, and skin picking are some examples
- ☐ Finding it harder than usual to focus on activities or interactions

- ☐ Reluctance to try things
- ☐ Wanting to do things their way or for things to be perfect
- ☐ Strong emotional reactions
- ☐ Fear of strangers that is unexpected for the child or beyond the developmental age where this is common
- ☐ Distress separating from parents/carers that is unexpected for the child or beyond the developmental age where this is common
- ☐ Staying away from certain people, activities, or things
- ☐ Asking the same question or seeking frequent reassurance

Other behavioural cues can include:

Other helpful information about these cues:

Common things that might lead to feeling worried, scared, or unsure:

Tick all that apply.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ New/unfamiliar people/places | ☐ Mealtimes |
| ☐ Large groups or group activities | ☐ Enclosed spaces |
| ☐ Too much noise | ☐ Play equipment |
| ☐ Loud or unexpected sounds (e.g.,
alarms or hand dryers) | ☐ Certain toys |
| ☐ Busy or crowded spaces | ☐ Toileting or bathrooms |
| ☐ Bright lights | ☐ Unstructured/free play |
| ☐ High energy play | ☐ Unexpected touch or being bumped |
| ☐ Separating from parent or
caregiver | ☐ Stopping a preferred activity unexpectedly |
| ☐ Changes in familiar routines or
places | ☐ Being watched or put on the spot |
| ☐ Moving between activities/task
transitions | ☐ Certain smells (e.g., food, cleaning
products) |
| ☐ Sensory or messy play | ☐ Specific food textures/smells/appearance |
| ☐ Animals | ☐ Group singing, mat time, or "circle time"
activities |

**Other things, places, or activities
that might lead to feeling worried,
scared, or unsure:**



Calming strategies:

Tick all that apply.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Dummy/pacifier | ☐ Co-regulation |
| ☐ Other familiar comfort toys or objects | ☐ Knowing what will happen (e.g., using a social story) |
| ☐ Gentle rhythmic movements (e.g., rocking, swinging, swaying, pacing) | ☐ Extra time to process information, adjust, or respond |
| ☐ Being with a familiar adult or sibling | ☐ Approaching new people, places, or activities at their own pace |
| ☐ Familiar routines | ☐ Extra warning and time before changes or transitions |
| ☐ Less sensory input (e.g., going to a quiet, dimly lit space) | ☐ Relaxation activities |
| ☐ Music or songs | ☐ Encouragement and gentle reassurance |

Other support strategies:

