



Information for parents
ENGLAND, NORTHERN IRELAND,
SCOTLAND, WALES

contact For families
with disabled children

HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD WITH ANXIETY

This guide is based on Contact's parent workshop *Supporting Parents of Children with Anxiety*. Contact is a charity supporting families with disabled children.

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear. It is experienced through a combination of physical sensations, thoughts and feelings.

All children and young people feel worried sometimes and it is a normal part of growing up. It is natural for children to feel anxious when they change schools, do an exam or go into a new situation, for example. Once this situation has passed the child is able to soon calm down and feel better.

When anxiety takes hold

Anxiety can become a problem when a young person feels stuck in it, or when it feels like an overwhelming, distressing or unmanageable experience. It can make children imagine that things in their lives are worse than they really are, and can prevent them from confronting their fears.

If this kind of worrying goes on for a long time, it can leave a young person feeling exhausted and isolated, and limit the things they feel able to do. It can start to affect their every day lives.

Anxiety can also cause changes in their behaviour, such as becoming overly careful or avoiding things that trigger anxiety.

Natural stress or worry can come and go but anxiety can persist, whether you know the cause or not. However, it's important to remember that anxiety is normal and is part of your body's protective system.

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY?

Anxiety affects everyone differently and can be brought on by different situations. It's our body's natural internal alarm system that's designed to protect us from danger.



Anxiety enhances our alertness and attention by giving us a boost of adrenaline. This increases our heart rate and the amount of oxygen going to our limbs. This is called the 'fight or flight response'. It can be triggered in everyday situations when stress or worry has built up, often unknowingly.

The fight-or-flight response comes from caveman times and was designed to help us to either fight, freeze or flee from danger. It is our body's natural response to danger. It's also the cause of the 'butterflies in the stomach' feeling that's often associated with anxiety.

Some children can be born more anxious and less able to cope with stress than others. Children can also pick up anxious behaviour from being around anxious people.

Life events can also have an impact, for example:

- **regularly moving house or school, lots of change in short space of time**
- **having responsibilities beyond their age, for example young carers**
- **parents fighting or arguing**
- **family stress like debt or housing**
- **school-related issues like exams, struggling with pressure or bullying**
- **any changes to routine, expected or unexpected.**