



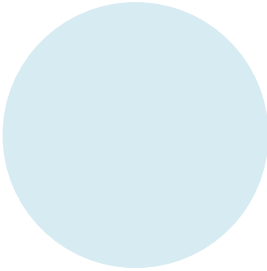
BIG FEELINGS LAB

Understanding Anxiety in Children

What it can look like, what helps, and simple phrases to use in the hardest moments.

A gentle guide

Created to help you look beneath behaviour and respond with more calm, confidence, and understanding.



Created by Big Feelings Lab
Helping Growing Minds Understand Big Feelings
www.bigfeelingslab.com

A gentle note before you start

Childhood anxiety can be confusing because it often doesn't look like worry. It can show up as anger, avoidance, clinginess, tears, physical complaints, sleep struggles, or a child going suddenly very quiet.

This guide is here to help you pause and ask: ***What might be happening underneath this behaviour?*** When we understand anxiety as a nervous-system response rather than a 'difficult behaviour', it becomes easier to respond with calm, clear boundaries, and compassion.

The important reminder

Anxiety is not a parenting failure — and it is not a flaw in your child. Many children feel anxiety more strongly during times of change, uncertainty, pressure, sensory overwhelm, or when they simply don't have the words to describe what is happening inside.

You don't need to be perfect. Your child doesn't need a perfect parent — they need a steady adult who keeps trying to understand what is happening beneath the surface.

Please remember

This guide is for general support and education only. It is not a diagnosis or a replacement for professional advice. If your child's anxiety is affecting daily life, school, eating, sleep, friendships, or safety, please seek support from your GP, school, SENCO, or a qualified child mental health professional.

What anxiety can look like in children

The signs can look like something else entirely—especially when a child doesn't yet have the words to explain what is happening inside.

School refusal or clinginess

Refusing to go in, crying at the school door, or needing repeated reassurance before separating.

Physical complaints

Stomach aches, headaches, nausea, or generally feeling unwell before something stressful.

Big emotional reactions

Tears, anger, panic, shutdown, or reactions that seem far bigger than the situation.

Repeated reassurance seeking

Asking the same question again and again, even after it has been answered.

Sleep struggles

Difficulty settling, waking in the night, nightmares, or needing extra closeness at bedtime.

Avoidance or rigidity

Steering clear of things they used to enjoy, or becoming very fixed about routines and order.

Withdrawing

Going quiet, hiding away, zoning out, or seeming to disappear into themselves.

The message underneath

Beneath many anxious behaviours is the same message: ***Something doesn't feel safe inside me right now.***

Why some children feel it more than others

Some children simply feel things more intensely —they notice more, process more. Their nervous systems can be especially sensitive to change, uncertainty, noise, transitions, social pressure, or the weight of unspoken expectations.

That sensitivity can be an extraordinary strength. It can also be exhausting — for the child, and for the adults around them.

Anxiety may be more visible during:

- starting a new school, class, club, or routine
- family changes, moving house, illness, separation, or loss
- friendship difficulties or social pressure
- tests, performances, appointments, or unfamiliar places
- times when a child struggles to put their inner world into words
- neurodivergence, including autism or ADHD, where emotional regulation may already be working harder

This changes the question

Instead of asking, "**Why are they being difficult?**" try asking, "**What feels too much for them right now, and what would make this feel safer?**"

Understanding the driver behind a behaviour doesn't mean allowing every behaviour. It means responding to the need underneath — while still holding kind, clear boundaries.

What helps in the anxious moment

In the middle of anxiety, a child is rarely ready for logic. Anxiety responds first to regulation: calm, safety, connection, and one small step at a time.

1 Steady yourself first

Children co-regulate with the adults around them. Take one slow breath, lower your voice, soften your face, and ease the pace. Your calm is contagious.

2 Name what you see

Try: *"I can see your body feels really worried right now."* This builds emotional language without adding judgement or pressure.

3 Take the pressure off talking

Don't push for a big explanation during a moment of panic. Sitting nearby in quiet companionship is often far more helpful than a string of questions.

4 Offer one small choice

Try: *"Do you want to sit with me or get some water?"* A small, simple choice can return a meaningful sense of control.

5 Repeat simple calming tools

Return to the same few tools again and again — breathing, a familiar object, a song, a gentle walk, a drink, or a calm, designated space.

A useful aim

The goal isn't to fix every feeling straight away. It's to help your child feel less alone inside it.

Simple phrases that can change the moment

When your child is anxious, you don't need to find the perfect sentence. The goal is simply to communicate: ***You are safe. I am here. We can take this one step at a time.***

Instead of...	Try...
"What's wrong?"	"I'm right here with you."
"There's nothing to worry about."	"Your body feels really worried right now."
"Just calm down."	"Let's slow everything down together."
"Why are you doing this?"	"Something feels hard. We can work through it step by step."
"You have to tell me."	"You don't have to explain it yet. I'll stay right here with you."
"You'll be fine."	"This feels big right now — but it won't last forever."

The phrase to come back to

"I'm right here with you." This simple phrase takes the pressure off your child and gives them the message they need most: they are not alone with the feeling.

Calming tools to keep simple and consistent

Calming tools work best when they are simple, familiar, and practised **outside** the crisis moment—think of them as emotional muscle memory.

Choose just two or three tools and come back to them regularly. Too many options can become another source of overwhelm.

A tiny plan for the hard moments

1. Lower your voice.
2. Name what you see.
3. Offer one small choice.
4. Stay close, without demanding an explanation.
5. Return to the same calming tool each time.

Slow breathing

Breathe in gently, breathe out for a little longer. Keep it relaxed and pressure-free.

Movement

A walk, a wall push, a stretch, or gentle heavy work can help the body find its way back to calm.

Drawing or writing

Especially useful for children who struggle to put feelings into spoken words.

A visual feelings tool

A feelings chart, card, or simple scale lets children point rather than speak.

A comfort object

A small item — a card, toy, or piece of fabric — that signals safety and familiarity.

Water or a snack

Sometimes regulation begins with the most basic body needs being met.

When to seek extra support

Many children go through anxious phases, especially during periods of change. But extra support can be genuinely helpful when anxiety starts to shrink your child's world.

Consider speaking to your GP, school, SENCO, health visitor, therapist, or a qualified child mental health professional if anxiety is:

- regularly affecting school attendance or learning
- causing ongoing sleep difficulties, changes in eating, or frequent physical complaints
- stopping your child from seeing friends, joining activities, or enjoying everyday life
- leading to frequent panic, shutdowns, aggression, or distress that feels unmanageable
- connected with self-harm, talk of not wanting to be here, or any safety concern

If there is any immediate safety concern

Seek urgent help straight away through your local emergency services, NHS 111 or 999 if appropriate, or your nearest urgent mental health support route.

Asking for support is not a sign of failure — it is a sign that you are taking your child's inner world seriously.

Your one-page reminder

Regulate first

Calm body first, conversation later. Logic rarely lands in the middle of panic.

Offer one small choice

Too many questions overwhelm. One small choice can restore a sense of control.

Use fewer words

"I'm right here with you." "Let's slow this down." "One step at a time."

Look underneath

Ask yourself: what feels unsafe, too much, uncertain, or too hard to put into words?

Repair when needed

You won't get it right every time — and that's okay. Coming back and reconnecting is what matters.

What your child may need most

You're not trying to remove every anxious feeling from your child's life. You're helping them learn that big feelings can be understood, supported, and survived.

About this guide

BIG FEELINGS LAB

Created by Big Feelings Lab, founded by a qualified occupational therapist with a mental health background.

Big Feelings Lab creates gentle emotional wellbeing resources for children, teenagers, parents, and schools. The aim is to help growing minds understand big feelings with calm, practical, easy-to-use support.

Important disclaimer

This guide is for general information and educational purposes only. It is not intended to diagnose, treat, or replace advice from a qualified health, education, or mental health professional. If you have concerns about your child's anxiety, emotional wellbeing, school attendance, eating, sleep, friendships, safety, or day-to-day functioning, please seek support from your GP, school, SENCO, therapist, or an appropriate professional service.

A gentle final reminder

You don't have to get every response right. What matters most is that your child experiences you as someone who keeps coming back, keeps trying to understand, and helps them feel a little less alone with their big feelings.

Explore more gentle emotional wellbeing resources

Visit Big Feelings Lab (www.bigfeelingslab.com) or KY Designx (www.shopkydesignx.com) for printable tools to support emotions, communication, learning, and the everyday moments that matter.