

Coping with fears and worries

The following examples are for families to use at home. They are most suitable for early primary aged children, but can be modified for use with older ages. The methods described can also be adapted by school staff to help children cope with fears and worries at school.

Parents and carers are usually the first people children look to for support and reassurance when they are scared or worried. Providing reassurance such as hugs and encouragement helps to restore children's sense of safety and confidence. Giving children a sense of safety includes limiting their exposure to frightening situations, such as violence – whether real or on TV. Parents and carers can also play a leading role in helping children learn skills for managing their fears.

Things to take into account

- It takes time and effort for children to learn new coping skills.
- Younger children usually learn best when you do it with them.
- Though older children may be able to use coping skills independently, they still need your support when scared.
- All children feel more secure and confident when they have regular quality time with parents and carers.
- Bedtime is often when children's fears surface. Try to ensure that children have calming time before bed to unwind. A regular bedtime routine or ritual helps children feel a sense of safety and security.





Encourage helpful thinking:
"Tell those scary thoughts
'I know I am safe and I won't let
you scare me!'"

The following example shows some possible ways a parent or carer might help Jessica, a six-year-old child who has difficulty going to sleep because of fears that something might happen to the house.

Child's difficulty

Feels scared and worried

Unsafe

Can't think through logically

Feels overwhelmed by scary thoughts

Lacks skills for coping

Has trouble relaxing

Doesn't feel confident about managing fears

May not believe in own ability

Some suggestions on how to support

Acknowledge feelings: "You're having trouble going to sleep because you're worried something might happen."

Reassure: "That storm was only on TV. It's not going to happen here."

Reality check: "The wind would have to be really, really strong to blow the roof off. We don't get those kinds of winds here."

Label: "That's just a scary thought. You don't have to keep it."

Demonstrate coping skill: "Let's blow the scary thoughts away. Take a deep breath and together we will blow them all away."

This example uses a simple idea and makes a game of blowing away all the scary thoughts. Using skills and images the child relates to, as well as making it fun, helps best.

Teach relaxation: Younger children often respond well to relaxation techniques that help them to visualise calming images (eg a waterfall or clouds floating gently across the sky).

Encourage helpful thinking: "Tell those scary thoughts 'I know I am safe and I won't let you scare me!'"

Praise and encouragement: "You did it. You're getting braver and braver!" or "You're trying really hard to be brave. Good on you!"

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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Fears and helpful self-talk

The following examples are for families to use at home. They are most suitable for older primary aged children. The methods described can also be adapted by school staff to help children cope with fears and worries at school.

What we say to ourselves affects how we feel. Thinking that a situation is too scary can make it so. Unhelpful self-talk increases children's anxious feelings and can make it more difficult for them to manage fears and worries. Self-talk includes all the things children say to themselves silently, as well as the things they sometimes say out loud. By contrast, when the things children say to themselves are helpful and encouraging, they support good coping skills and self confidence.

The following example shows how unhelpful self-talk has increased 12 year old Adam's fears about going to high school the following year.

Situation

School orientation visit

What Adam says to himself

- I don't know anyone here
- There are too many new faces
- They all seem to know one another, but they're ignoring me
- What if I don't make any friends?
- What if the teachers are mean?
- They expect you to do a lot of work
- What if I can't keep up?
- It's too hard

How he feels

- Alone
- Overwhelmed by strangers
- Panicky
- Lacks confidence

At home

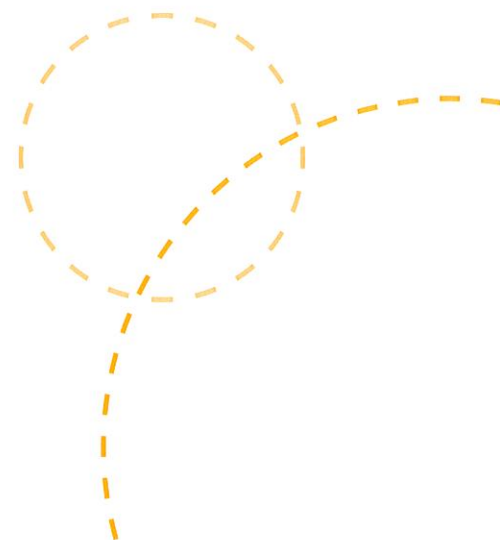
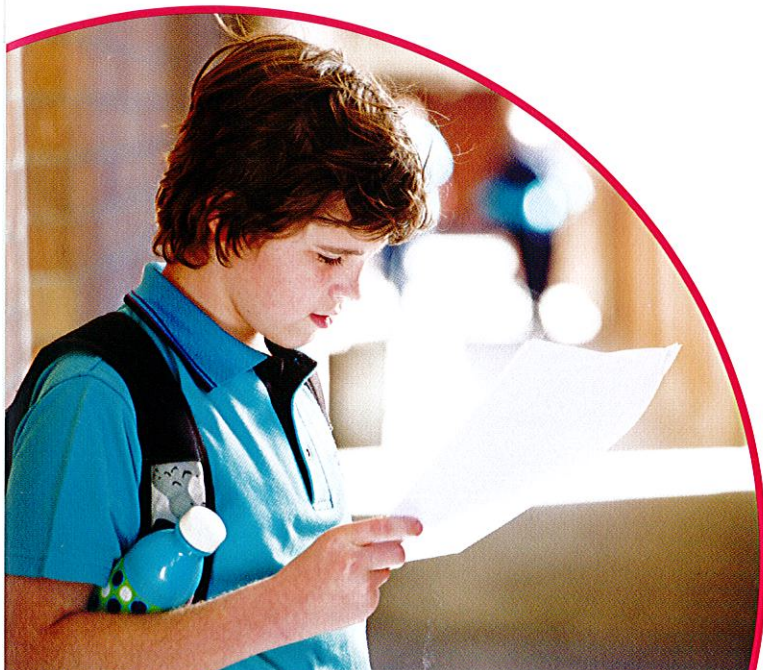
Tells mother

What Adam says to his mother

- "I don't want to go."

How he tries to cope

- Wants to avoid the feared situation





Adam's unhelpful self-talk has made his original problem much bigger. It has convinced him that he won't be able to cope at high school. For Adam to learn to manage his fears, he needs to learn to replace his unhelpful self-talk with helpful thinking. Parents and carers can help him to practice thinking in ways that are more helpful. Asking Adam why he doesn't want to go to high school and helping him look more realistically at his fears, might be a good place to start.

Adam's unhelpful thinking

- I don't know anyone here
- There are too many new faces
- They all seem to know one another, but they're ignoring me
- What if I don't make any friends?
- What if the teachers are mean?
- They expect you to do a lot of work
- What if I can't keep up?
- It's too hard

How to support helpful thinking

- Empathise: "I can see you are worried about going to high school. There are lots of new things for you and everybody else."
- Challenge: "What makes you so sure they're not looking for a new friend?"
- Suggest: "You can use your friendship skills to get to know them."
- Remind: "What have you done before when you've had a problem to deal with? Why not see this as a new adventure?"
- Emphasise the positives: "There are a lot more freedoms for high-schoolers."

Better ways to look at it

- I don't know anyone because I am new. I'm not the only one. There will be lots of new kids.
- I am good at making friends. I will soon get to know people.
- The teacher I met didn't seem too bad. There's no point worrying about something that may not be a problem.
- Lots of other kids will be in the same boat. I just have to remember to ask for help if I need it.
- It sounds like they have some good programs.

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