



Anxiety

About anxiety

We all worry or feel scared at times, but some children may worry so much that they avoid participating in activities, being with others, or going to places. Children with disabilities and developmental challenges often experience higher rates of anxiety than their peers. Anxiety can take different forms, and some children can show symptoms of a number of types of anxiety. You can learn about the different forms of anxiety in young children below.

Separation anxiety. Separation anxiety in very young children is normal, however, should lessen from around the age of two. Children with separation anxiety become upset when separated from caregivers or family members. They may find separation at the beginning of the day difficult.

Selective mutism. Children with selective mutism can become anxious about speaking in social situations. Children with selective mutism may speak confidently at home, yet not talk at all at an early childhood program or in other specific places. They may also find eye contact difficult.

Strengths

What might be some strengths?

- Children with anxiety may connect with trusted adults or peers for support.
- Children with selective mutism may cooperate well with other children and obey the rules, and so have good friends and avoid being bullied.

Where might you provide support?

- Worried and scared children usually try to avoid the thing that scares them. This could mean that they avoid or don't join in for some activities.



- They may look nervous or restless or they may keep to themselves. Some children who are really scared might cry and become very upset. If they are really worried or scared, they may refuse to attend their early childhood education and care program. A child with anxiety who refuses to participate may be feeling overwhelmed rather than misbehaving or being stubborn.
- They may seek lots of comfort from early childhood educators.
- Some children may be very upset when separating from their caregivers. Events that are out of routine, such as incursions/excursions and end of year concerts may be very challenging.

Evidence-based strategies

Consider how you communicate

- **Sit beside a child.** Work together on a specific activity instead of focusing your attention on the child.
- **If a child doesn't want to speak, you can think aloud.** Give some time for the child to answer, and continue to talk with the child even if they do not respond.

Adapt activities to be as inclusive as possible

- **Some tasks may need to be modified to better include a child.** Allow children to face fears gradually – start at a level they can manage and build from there. Allow them to watch other children perform an activity before they have a go.

Consider when and what type of feedback you give

- **Encourage and acknowledge effort.** Children with severe anxiety may accept negative consequences for not doing what they are told rather than face their fear. Encouraging a child for finishing or trying to do a task that makes them anxious can help motivate them.
- **Neutral responses for selective mutism.** When a child has selective mutism, it may be important to give a neutral response if they speak and not bring them unwanted attention. Ask the child's parents how you should respond when their child speaks.

Provide structure

- **Create a predictable environment.** If there are going to be changes to the normal routine, tell the child beforehand, and give them a clear idea of what will happen instead.
- **Provide clear rules and expectations.** This way children know what is expected from them.



Allow time to calm down

- **Spend a few minutes of each day doing simple relaxation exercises.** This can be good for all children – not just those with anxiety.

Activate social supports

- **Communicate with parents.** Talk to parents to find out the best way to work with their child. Parents can help you understand a child's unique strengths and areas they need more help.

Best practice tips

Make adjustments

- **Some children may need a safe place.** This gives them a place to go when anxious to reset and manage their anxiety. Identify a safe place and tell them what they need to do when they want to go to that place. For example, they could give you their “safe space” card rather than having to tell you verbally.
- **Collaborate with health professionals.** If a health professional (e.g. psychologist) is working with a child, actively incorporating their suggestions into the program can help provide opportunities for a child to manage their anxiety.

Provide a supportive and structured classroom environment

- **Create a warm and fun environment.** This includes making sure disruptive behaviour is managed well.
- **Don't draw attention to a child with anxiety.** Provide correction or encouragement to children privately.
- **Acknowledge a child's emotions.** Provide warm and calm support to a child when they are distressed or anxious, and acknowledge how they are feeling.
- **Model 'brave' behaviours.** Watching others model brave behaviours and helpful coping behaviours can help children learn how to overcome their own fears.

Monitor your own emotions

- **Be aware of how you are feeling.** Supporting a child with anxiety can at times be difficult, and you may feel frustrated. Being aware of your feelings and thoughts is important for a calm and supportive relationship with a child.



Early Years Learning and Development Outcomes

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Educators can help children with anxiety to feel safe, secure and supported by creating a predictable environment and routine, and helping children build positive relationships with educators and other children.
- Educators can help children with separation anxiety develop a sense of security and autonomy by helping them get organised and settled in at the beginning of a session, and encouraging them privately for participating.
- When first starting in a new early childhood education and care settings, children with anxiety may not feel secure or safe. Allow parents to help in the program at first to help a child feel secure while getting used to the new setting.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Visit AllPlay Learn's [resources page](#) for relevant resources and stories

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- A predictable routine and environment help a child feel secure and confident. Feeling secure and confident will support healthy emotional and social development.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Refer to adapt activities to be as inclusive as possible.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- A child with selective mutism or anxiety may need extra support for communication.
- Refer to consider how you communicate with children and consider when and what type of feedback you give.



Other considerations

End of year concerts and events

- Concerts or other large gatherings may increase anxiety in some children.
- Consider where children sit. Allow a child with anxiety to sit where they will feel comfortable (e.g. near the educator)
- Performing or receiving awards in front of others might cause anxiety in some children. Start with what a child can do and build slowly from there.

Relief educators

- Changes in routine can be upsetting for many children with anxiety, and strangers leading a session may be particularly upsetting.
- If possible let caregivers know of an absence beforehand so they can prepare their child for the change.
- Support the relief educator and child by informing them that the child may feel anxious and about strategies to best help the child.

Excursions

- Children with anxiety can become anxious with changes in routine.
- Provide clear information about what will take place and consider pairing them with a buddy or safe person or have a parent helper come along.

Emergency drills

- Unexpected safety drills may upset some children with anxiety.
- Consider letting the child know beforehand that there will be a drill, and pairing them with a buddy or safe person.

Behaviour

- Stories about social situations can highlight positive behaviours and routines in the early childhood education and care setting.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.



Separation

- Some children may be upset when separating from their caregivers in the morning.
- Provide warm and calm support to the child and acknowledge what they are feeling.
- If a child is too upset to join the class straight away, give them a safe space they can go to instead.
- Some children may separate more easily if they can choose where their parent will say goodbye.
- If separation is causing a lot of distress allow parents to help out in the program at first. As the child starts to feel more secure, parent involvement can be gradually reduced.

Transitions

- A child with anxiety may find moving from the early childhood education and care setting to another setting (i.e. another early childhood education and care setting or primary school) challenging.
- For more information about supporting children with disabilities when transitioning to a different education setting, access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).

Other co-occurring conditions

- Anxiety is common in children with developmental delays including [autism](#).

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for children with anxiety include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Emotion cards (A4)
- Problem solving guide
- AllPlay Learn Story - What to do when I miss my family at childcare
- AllPlay Learn Story - What to do when I miss my family at kindergarten