

## Generic Advice on Supporting Children with Anxiety, inclusive of Revealing Diagnosis of ASD





“ When I was asked to draw something which would help people to understand Autism, I decided to draw a picture showing the emotions you feel inside your head. Each day can be a bit of an emotional rollercoaster! Sometimes you have to put a smile on your face to hide how you’re really feeling, so that you don’t stand out, but deep down, you may feel worried, upset and overwhelmed. Sometimes your worries and anxieties have to come out! It’s important to have someone you trust to share your feelings with so that it doesn’t overtake the happy moments! I love drawing! It helps me to escape my anxieties and makes me feel calm and free with no worries or pressure!” *(Current Post Primary Pupil, NI)*

# Progressive Muscle Relaxation

## Whole Body Script

**1 Forehead**  
Scrunch up your forehead like you are thinking hard! Squeeze it tighter, tighter! Now you can relax. (hold for around 10 seconds)

**2 Eyes**  
Squeeze your eyes tight like you are about to blow out the candles on your cake and make a wish! No peeking! (10 seconds)

**3 Cheeks**  
Puff your cheeks out as far as you can! Make them bigger, like you have a mouth full of food! Now, relax (10 seconds)

**4 Mouth**  
I want you to pretend you are chewing a really big piece of gum! It's really hard to chew, but keep chewing! (10 seconds)

**5 Shoulders**  
I want you to try and touch your shoulder blades together! Squeeze tighter, you're almost there! Now you can relax (10 seconds)

**6 Arms**  
I want you to make your arms as straight and stiff as possible! Pretend you are frozen! Now you can relax (10 seconds)

**7 Lower Back**  
Sit up super straight and try to be as tall as you can! Taller! Taller! And now relax (10 seconds)

**8 Legs**  
I want you to make your legs as straight as you can! Pretend you are frozen again! Now you can relax (10 seconds)

**9 Feet**  
I want you to press your feet into the ground as hard as you can! Push, Push! And now relax (10 seconds)

**10 Toes**  
Pretend you are at the beach, and squish your toes in the sand! So squishy! And now relax (10 seconds)

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Develop a Sunday evening plan with the family and a Monday morning school plan (Sunday Evening and Monday Morning Plans taken from Dr Tina Rae's upcoming publication for Hinton House Publications called *The Essential Guide to Emotionally Based School Avoidance*);

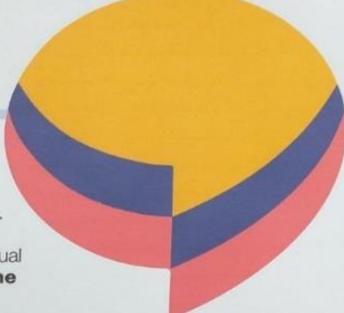
## Sunday evening plan



-  **Soothe** – do some calming activities and make the last things at night soothing – gentle music, story for younger ones, soft lighting, **talk about 3 good things before bed.**
-  **Understand** – make sure you let them know that you do understand their feelings and you do not negate or dismiss them - you understand how hard it is but it will get better in time! **Develop your script for this if appropriate.**
-  **Neutralise** – record any worries in a worry book and then talk through each one helping the child to see a solution/where they are catastrophising and **show them the evidence against any irrational thoughts thinking patterns.**
-  **Decide** – on a plan of action and go through it step by step – this is what we will do tomorrow. Work out the schedule and ensure that everything is ready – book, bag, PE kit *etc* and laid out for the next morning. **Make the plan visual if needed.**
-  **Attend** – be vigilant to the child's emotional state and give more time if they need it so that they feel nurtured and safe. **Give reassurance and a transitional object for younger children.**
-  **Yourself** – look after yourself and make sure that you are regulated and feel calm yourself. Engage in some relaxation and take time out after the bedtime routine for you to build up your own resources and **remember that it is ok to feel worried but don't let it overwhelm you.**

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## Monday morning plan



-  **Manage** – manage yourself **FIRST!** This is not selfish. This is not selfish. You cannot support a child or young person who is unregulated and stressed if you are too. Take time to sort your own needs and then manage your emotional state by using your usual stress management tools *e.g. grounding/time alone Mindfulness etc.*
-  **Organise** – get everything ready (*by getting up earlier*) so the bags are in the hallway, the breakfast is set up and you own things for work/whatever you need are all organised. **This means that you can attend to the child and do so in a regulated manner.**
-  **Neutralise** – spend some time with your child talking through any worries and again **helping them to see a solution where they are catastrophising** and show them the evidence against any **irrational thoughts thinking patterns.**
-  **Decide** – this is the plan – make it clear to them that you have a plan to get to school, how you will get here, what music you might listen to **in the car stories you might tell to each other on the bus as you walk who else might be with you etc** so that it all becomes clear and they feel prepared for each step.
-  **Accept** – accept the child's emotional state and give them reassurance that you love and care for them so that they feel nurtured and safe. Give reassurance and a transitional object for younger children. **It is okay to feel anxious, but we all need to manage it and I will help you. I am with you and will stay with you while you need me.**
-  **Yourself - again** look after yourself and make sure that you are regulated and feel calm yourself. Engage in some relaxation and remember that it is ok to feel worried but don't let it overwhelm you. **keep using the script – if I stay calm, I will make him her feel safe.**

# Phrases for calming anxious children

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These phrases can be useful if you're supporting a child or young person who is feeling anxious. The best words are your own, so use these just as a starting point.

## SAFETY

Using phrases that reassure a child that they are physically and emotionally can be deeply reassuring. Phrases like:

- I'm here I've got you
- It's okay, you're safe
- I'm going to stay with you
- You're going to be okay

## PHYSIOLOGY

Using phrases that acknowledge the physiology of panic and anxiety, that remind them the biology behind why they feel how they do right now and that this feeling will not last indefinitely. Phrases like:

- Your body is responding in an anxious way
- This will pass
- Let's give it a minute and see if you feel just slightly better
- Your body can't feel like this forever
- You've got through this before, you can get through this again

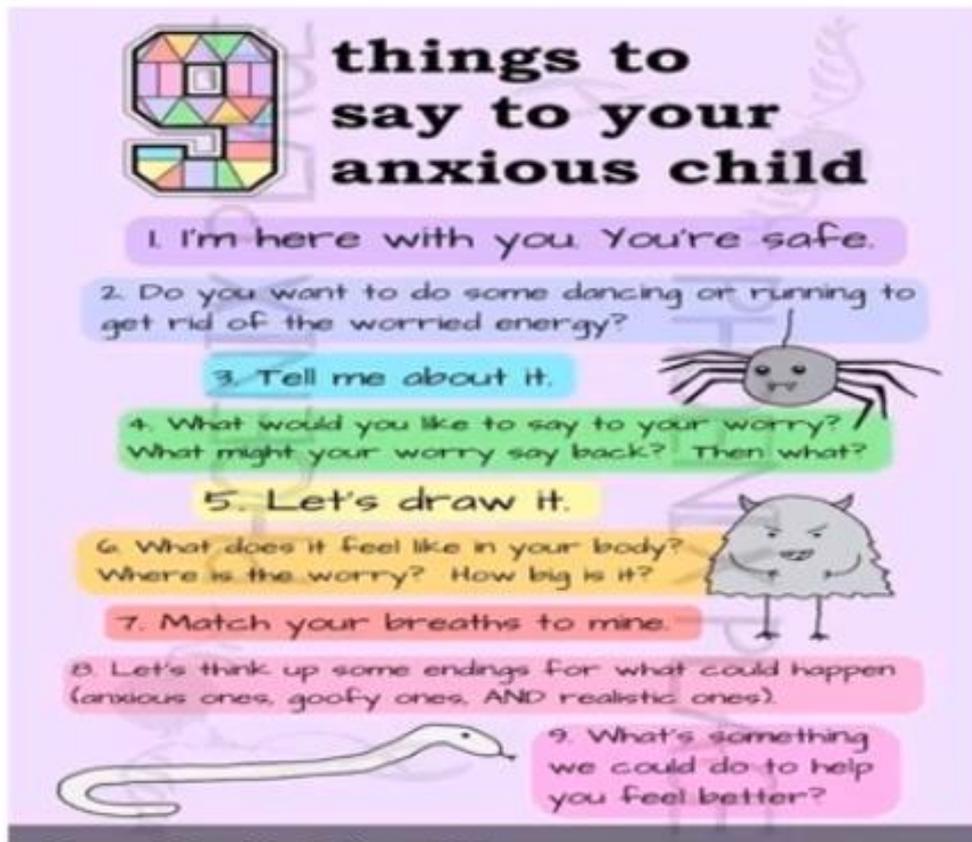
## VALIDATION

We need to be careful not to dismiss or minimise a child's concern; if they feel anxious or panicked, that's a real feeling even if we don't understand or agree with the trigger for this feeling. Acknowledging and validating how a child feels without trying to explain or dismiss it can be very powerful. Phrases like:

- That must be really hard
- I'm sorry that X is making you feel anxious
- I can see that X is really worrying you, would you like to talk about / draw that?
- I can see X is really worrying you, I'm going to sit with you until you feel calmer and later we'll begin to unpick it
- That sounds really hard, do you want to talk about it?
- I can see you're very worried, how can I help you?
- It's not silly, if it's making you feel like this, it matters



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Suggestions and Advice from Dr Pooky Knightsmith - <https://www.pookyknightsmith.com/>

- Consider, *I want* – why does that child want to go to school, *I'm wanted* – making them feel they are wanted in the environment, *I can* – creating success for the child;
- Aim really low, we want the child to succeed, small steps eg sitting in a room with school books or wearing uniform for 30 minutes. Think about what child can do and get them to do it, then stop and celebrate. Lots and lots of tiny steps – sometimes kids don't make the next step but that's ok;
- Create a good routine for drop off, try to communicate calmly – **slow, low, low - slowing down what we are saying, lowering the volume, lowering the tone**. Also one or two go to phrases to repeat eg “it will be ok”, “you did it yesterday, you can do it today”
- Try to work out the problem for the child, try to make it feel different for the child, small successes. If story is one of school refuser, help them rewrite that story and create a new identity. Give them a sense of purpose and belonging in school.
- Small steps to make it sustainable.
- Can't force child to talk to someone we choose. Stop and think about their lives, is there anyone they have a positive relationship with, who do they like, who could they engage with – could they act as a mentor. Having someone slightly removed from situation may help;
- Language and tone matters – **Safety** – ‘im here for you, Im staying here, you are going to be ok’, **physiology** – ‘this will pass, your body is responding in an anxious way, give it time and it will pass’, **validation** – ‘I understand this must be difficult for you’;

**“Arm rather than alarm”**

**Resources and Support for Assisting to Understand Diagnosis**

## A selection of book suggestions that may be of interest

### Does your child suffer from fears and worries that affect their behaviour or keep them awake at night?

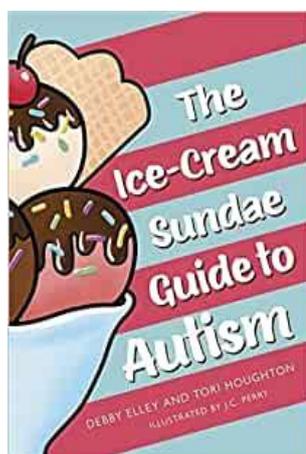


Fears and worries are very common among children with around 15% thought to suffer from anxiety disorders; the most commonly identified emotional or behavioural problems among children. However, if left unchecked, they can cause more serious problems such as school avoidance, difficulties in making friends and long-term problems with anxiety and depression.

Written by two of the UK's foremost experts on childhood anxiety, this extremely useful guide will enable you to understand what is causing your child's worries and to carry out step-by-step practical strategies to help him or her to overcome them, including:

- Addressing specific fears and phobias as well as general anxiety and 'worrying'
- Using case studies, worksheets and charts

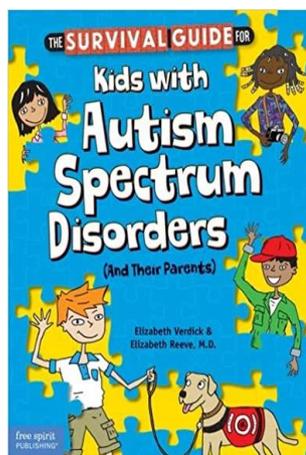
**Helping Your Child** is a series for parents and caregivers to support children through developmental difficulties, both psychological and physical. Each guide uses clinically-proven techniques. **£9.83 Amazon**



*Autism is a bit like an ice-cream sundae. There are lots of ingredients that go into it. There are so many types of sundae glasses out there. Some are plain and simple, some are loud and proud! In fact, sundae glasses are a bit like people - we're all different. Because we all have different personalities, autism doesn't look the same in everybody.*

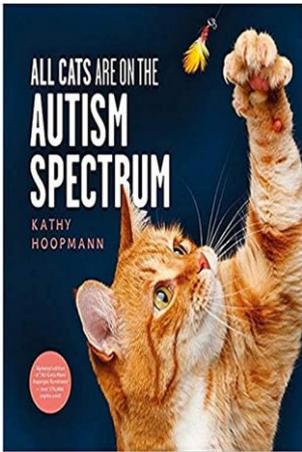
This picture-led book uses ice-cream sundae ingredients to represent various aspects of autism such as sensory differences, special interests or rigidity of thinking, explaining the different facets of autism in a neutral way. The reader can create their own individual 'ice-cream sundae' to illustrate their personal strengths and challenges, highlighting how it makes them unique and helping to build confidence and self-awareness. It includes colourful illustrations and

workbook activities to help children cement their understanding of autism. **£12.99 Amazon**



This positive, straightforward book offers kids with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) their own comprehensive resource for both understanding their condition and finding tools to cope with the challenges they face every day. Some children with ASDs are gifted; others struggle academically. Some are more introverted, while others try to be social. Some get "stuck" on things, have limited interests, or experience repeated motor movements like flapping or pacing ("stims"). "The Survival Guide for Kids with Autism Spectrum Disorders" covers all of these areas, with an emphasis on helping children gain new self-understanding and self-acceptance.

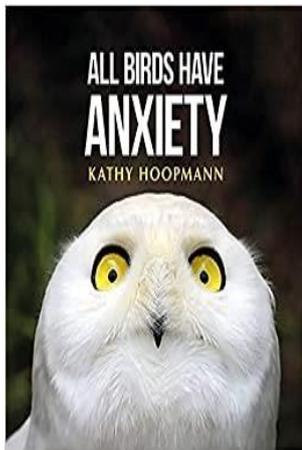
Meant to be read with a parent, the book addresses questions ("What's an ASD?" "Why me?") and provides strategies for communicating, making and keeping friends, and succeeding in school. Body and brain basics highlight symptom management, exercise, diet, hygiene, relaxation, sleep, and toileting. Emphasis is placed on helping kids handle intense emotions and behaviors and get support from family and their team of helpers when needed. The book includes stories from real kids, fact boxes, helpful checklists, resources, and a glossary. Sections for parents offer more detailed information. **£11.79 Amazon**



This updated edition of the bestselling *All Cats Have Asperger Syndrome* provides an engaging, gentle introduction to autism.

All-new cats take a playful look at the world of autism, and these fun feline friends will strike a chord with all those who are familiar with typical autistic traits, bringing to life common characteristics such as sensory sensitivities, social issues and communication difficulties.

Touching, humorous and insightful, this book evokes all the joys and challenges of being on the autism spectrum, leaving the reader with a sense of the dignity, individuality and the potential of autistic people. **£10.23 Amazon**



Life as a bird can be stressful! From worrying about airplanes, windows, and getting enough worms to eat, it is clear that birds can be anxious beings. Through a light-touch, quizzical depiction of bird behaviour, *All Birds Have Anxiety* uses colourful images and astute explanations to explore with gentle humour what it means to live with anxiety day-to-day, and how to begin to deal with it.

Following the style of the best-selling *All Cats Have Asperger Syndrome* and *All Dogs Have ADHD*, wonderful colour photographs express the complex and difficult ideas related to anxiety disorder in an easy-to-understand way. This simple yet profound book validates the deeper everyday experiences of anxiety, provides an empathic understanding of the many symptoms associated with anxiety, and offers compassionate suggestions for change.

The combination of understanding and gentle humour make this the ideal introduction to anxiety disorder for those diagnosed with this condition, their family and friends and those generally interested in understanding anxiety. **£9.99 Amazon**

## Amazing Things Happen – clip explaining autism

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezv85LMFx2E>

## Other Possible Resources:

### *Mindfulness*

<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/thrive-inside>

There are some **excellent** mindfulness meditations on this site, thoroughly recommend.

<https://www.calm.com/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/>

### *Help from Experts*

<https://www.pookyknightsmith.com/>

<https://www.reachoutasc.com/>

<https://suelarkey.com.au/>

<http://www.safehandstinkingminds.co.uk/about-us/>

### *Calming Techniques*

Hand or star breathing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAldSdx-jps&feature=youtu.be>

Sensory, grounding, soothing and regulating box -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XyxqWiqLk0&feature=youtu.be>

Muscle tensing and releasing tool - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbhUxg9eHDE&feature=youtu.be>

Left and right body breathing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHwiqovPrXY&feature=youtu.be>

Rhythm and butterfly breathing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6z6TJ1wQDM&feature=youtu.be>

Externalising worry through worry dolls, worry plaques etc <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Q-EoWSJQJg&feature=youtu.be>

Soaking in a positive moment <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRiQixmqcXI&feature=youtu.be>

**When addressing concerns or worries, try to provide a Plan B for children so they know how to cope if Plan A does not work.**