

Anxiety in Children

Full transcript · 6 video clips · generated 22 September 2026

About this transcript. This transcript was produced automatically from the video audio. It has not been checked by a person, so names, place names, te reo Māori and medical terms may be wrong in places. The video is the record. If something here reads oddly, please check it against the video.

Watch the series: listeningtofamilies.co.nz/anxiety/anxiety-in-children

IN THIS TRANSCRIPT

1. What is Anxiety
2. How do I talk to my child about anxiety
3. Worrying about your Childs anxiety
4. Warning signs that the anxiety is getting worse
5. In crisis
6. When should I seek help

1. What is Anxiety

Kia ora, my name's Deb Bradshaw, Clinical Team Leader for Te Tumu Waiora for Pegasus Health here in Canterbury. And kia ora, I'm Fiona Prest, I'm a Clinical Psychologist with our CAF Mental Health Service here in Canterbury. So Fiona, often we have parents coming in asking us about anxiety in their children. You know, how do I know if my child is anxious and what do I do when they are anxious? You know, it's a really common thing that we're seeing quite frequently these days. And I think in one practice I saw last month, 51% of the presentations were around anxiety. So it's fairly prevalent. Deb, that's such a broad topic that I hope I'm going to be able to condense it into some really useful pieces.

I was thinking about anxiety and really how it's such a normal thing. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It's so common. Probably most days we all experience a little bit of that. And I think that's really important to remember that anxiety is there for a reason. It's kind of a signal that something's changed or there's some possible dangerous situation. And it really helps to prepare us for those things. I was thinking this morning just coming in here to do the talk in some ways. Yeah. some of the adrenaline and the cortisol that rushes through when we feel anxious can help us perform a little bit better as well.

Absolutely. And so some of the questions that we get asked from parents, I think my child is anxious, what do I do? Perhaps I'll just start with thinking about anxiety as a response, and kids in particular. Yeah, and it is a, you know, with anxiety we get that fight-flight response that comes up and we can see that happening in our kids and we can see how they present, it can present in a lot of different ways. So sometimes you get that classic shyness and withdrawal and I don't want to do that and I want to stay away because it feels too scary. Sometimes you get quite a lot of anxiety. A lot of sort of irritability and feistiness, but actually underneath that, that's that fight response, the child is actually feeling quite scared.

And sometimes they'll even present with some physical things, like every time that there's a big sports match on, that suddenly their tummy's sore when they can't go. So it's really important to be mindful that it can present in different ways in our kids. And for some kids, it takes on very particular things that they do to try and feel in control because anxiety makes us feel that we're not in control.

Absolutely. So some kids might get into some of those obsessive-compulsive things. We might notice our kids doing a lot of rituals, things over and over again, or having to do things in particular ways, or getting very upset.

The order's changed, and that's all part of the ways that anxiety can present in our kids. So it's being aware of that, and also that across development, different things will peak at different times. So if you think of our little infants, they'll have a very strong startle response if the vacuum cleaner goes on suddenly, or with toddlers, they go through, it's a normal developmental stage of the separation anxiety that comes up. And then as their language develops and their imagination develops, they start worrying about the monsters in the dark, and they hold onto some things they've heard or seen in videos and things.

And that's normal, and it's how do you help them just to process some of that. And we'll go on to... We'll be talking about that. And then, of course, as they get into middle school, middle childhood, they start having fears about performance and about sometimes bullying from other kids. And adolescence, because the big task of adolescence is being able to identify and belong with your peer group, so then social anxiety takes a huge peak. So that's where we start to see that school refusal. That's right. Yeah. That's right. So it's also thinking about, is this happening, is this out of sync with what should be happening at this stage?

And not over-pathologising something that might be a process you just need to help them through. So normalising when... Normalising it. You know, when they're really stressed about or anxious about an exam coming up. Yeah. Kind of normalising that for them. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And we all have different temperaments, so some kids are much more sensitive to any change, and so they will be, you know, more prone to getting anxious. And some families tend to be more anxious than others. Right. Yeah. So there's that inheritability factor. And I'm thinking about life events that happen, and in Christchurch, we know that our kids have had a number of significant natural disaster, the earthquakes and then the mosque shootings, which kind of can make them feel that the world isn't a safe place.

Absolutely. Yeah. And, yeah. That's really helpful to explain what anxiety is for young people. Yeah. Yeah.

2. How do I talk to my child about anxiety

So some of the questions that come up for us from parents is what do I do when I notice that my child is anxious and how do I talk to my child about their anxiety without making it worse? Yeah, I think perhaps first step is think about what's helpful for us when we're feeling anxious or stressed and what do we need when we're feeling that and that's a really good guide. So the first thing we all want is some support. Absolutely. And so that's what we do with our kids too. We validate and support and empathise with what they're feeling and that helps them feel that they're not on their own and they're being held.

And really we're... As caregivers, I like to think of us as being this sort of steady bowl that contains and calms and holds some of those big feelings and kids learn best from modelling. So the more we can show them that this is okay and I've got this and we can get through this, the more they're going to be able to feel that they can do that too. So how do we help our kids be brave? And build some of that resilience to manage these stresses which life is going to keep throwing at us. It's a great way of putting it, isn't it? How do we help our kids to be brave? I think that's... Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Because it's not about never having anxiety. It's about how do we... It's there for a reason. It's an important signal. It's protective. But how do we keep it in a manageable range? Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. So I think as parents we need to... I'm thinking about that analogy that the airways use a lot of how when you're with the oxygen mask, they always say put your own oxygen mask on first before you attend to your kids. Absolutely. And it is like that too. So just noticing what's happening for us because anxiety is very infectious. Right. We pick up very quickly when someone... And we respond with anxiety too usually.

So being able to step back, breathe, calm ourselves and then show that we've got that. And I guess that's something we see quite frequently with parents coming in really anxious because their child is anxious about going to school or upcoming exams. So yeah, we see that it kind of escalates the child. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And that, you know, all those moments that we as a parent can teach our kids. This is hard and I can do this and we can do it and it's okay to put that out. This is externalise the anxiety. Right. This is what it's doing and it will peak and it passes. It's kind of normalising it in a way, isn't it?

Yeah. Yeah. Ride the wave. Yeah. Yeah.

3. Worrying about your Childs anxiety

Fiona, one of the things we do see a lot and a lot of parents are asking is how do I stop myself from becoming stressed when I know that my child is anxious? Because as we've talked before when we're stressed as an adult our children pick up on that and that sort of escalates the stress or anxiety levels. How do we stop ourselves becoming really really anxious and stressed about their anxiety? So yeah and that's that infectiousness and it goes both ways. Absolutely. I think we really need to make sure we're doing some of those

self-care things for ourselves, that we're getting support when we need it, that we can check out with other with people we trust as to whether this is something that's sort of normal that I can just sort of ride through or whether this is something that's just normal.

That maybe I need more support. Right. And that and finding, you know, practicing some of the things we want to practice, help our kids practice around regulating ourselves, being able to stop and step back and take a breath and build, you know, that sense of coping. So kind of finding ways to ride that wave that you're in. Yeah. I think that's really important. I think that's really important. So kind of finding ways to ride that wave that you're in. Yeah. I think that's really important. you talked about before. Yeah. You know and that might include breathing techniques. It might. Making sure that we do some of those really basic things and that's what we'll do with our kids too, that we make sure that we're getting good food and fluids, that we're not, and we can see that particularly with kids, that they'll get more anxious when they're hungry, if you think about infants.

What do we do with the infants, if they need more food? They need rest, they need some quiet space, or they need a gentle holding, or they need, they're too hot, or they're too cold. So using all those, tired, and using all the sensory things that are calming and comforting as well. Yeah. And we're going to talk, you're going to talk some more about those things later, aren't we? Yes, we can. Yeah. And being kind to ourselves, you know, that it makes sense. When we do the thinking as adults, we can possibly step back and think about, aha, what is it that might have kind of set this up for me? What has, what has stressed me a little bit?

Yeah. And then also doing the thinking for our kids. Absolutely. So that we've got a sense of that. And sometimes thinking about, when I was, when I was feeling like this the last time, what did I do to get through it? Definitely. And kind of, in a way, normalising it again. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And reminding ourselves that we did get through it. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

4. Warning signs that the anxiety is getting worse

Another question that we often get asked is, what are the warning signs that my child's anxiety is getting worse and getting to a point where we need to access some support or help in dealing with it? Do you know, there's a really lovely book called, I think it's written by Karen Young, and it's called Hey Warrior. I don't know if you've come across it, Deb, but it's a lovely book to read with kids. And I've certainly used it even with adolescents. So it's, and it's all about this little, the amygdala, which is the part of our brain, which is our alarm system. And it's depicted as this little warrior creature and how it talks about that it's there, it's our superpower.

But actually at times it becomes, it takes control of everything. And it stops us doing everything, anything. It protects us too well. And that's how we work with that. So I think that's what happens when anxiety is there too much of the time. You know, it's sort of duration is extended or it's happening very frequently too often. Or it's the response is too intense. You know, that for the situation, this is a really strong response. So those are the signs to look out for when the, that alarm system is becoming a little bit faulty. Right. So it's overworking. It's overworking. Kicking in too often.

Yeah. So it's almost like it's too sensitive. It's sort of the start switch isn't working and it's going off too quickly. Or, and the stop switch is faulty. It kind of, we're not ever switching at all. Okay, yeah. And moving on. Yeah. So it's looking out for those kind of signs. Right. For our kids. And as you talked earlier on, that's probably difficult for families to gauge, isn't it? Because as you said, every family's different. That's right. And some families. And some families are going to have a much more sensitive alarm switch. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. Or certain, you know, having certain experiences has made that switch much more sensitive.

So it's really important to be. Really thinking about, yeah, is this, it's kind of stepping over from that normal responding to something more. Right. Yeah. And I guess there's lots of people that you can seek some support from via schools. Check it out. Check it out. Yeah. You know, yeah. Check it out. Absolutely. What are other kids doing? Absolutely. How they're responding to the situation. Mm. Mm. Not in terms of any critical stuff, but just kind of just getting a gauge of, oh, maybe this feels like it's more than it needs to be at the moment. And, and there, yeah, I think we're going to go on to some things that we can do in that situation.

But possibly the other thing to notice is the impact that it's having. Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. If it's starting to interfere with. Um. Our child's functioning in some way, that they're not sleeping properly, that they're not eating, that they're struggling to get to school, or they're wanting to avoid that. That's a big one. Yeah. That is something we see quite frequently. Or they're avoiding social, you know, the socializing is being impacted. Particularly for, for teenagers, I guess, isn't it? Yeah. When we see them withdrawing socially, that's. Yeah. Yeah. An indicator. Yeah.

So those are the things to look out for, um, frequency, the duration, that it's not sort of turning off, they, they just seem anxious all the time, that they're, um, that it's too intense in relation to what you would think the stress, uh, um, is indicating, and that it's starting to interfere with normal functioning. So the eating and the sleeping. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. That's really helpful. Mm-hmm. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

5. In crisis

So often we get parents coming in asking what do we do in a crisis when our child's at that crisis point. And often, and I know I've talked about this a bit, but school refusal seems to be a crisis, you know, that's a crisis point for some families. So often, yeah, parents will ask, what do I do in a crisis? Again, I'm thinking of a, John Gottman is a very renowned therapist working with parents in particular and around emotion coaching. And he talks about the first thing that we need to do, and we've mentioned it already, is do that, a bit of that empathising and validating and gently hugging, helping our kids to gently hug those big feelings.

Okay. And naming it, you know, for what it is. So by saying I can see you're really anxious about going to school. Yeah. And as for all of us, if we're struggling or worried about something and somebody straight away comes in and tries to fix it or tell us this is what you've got to do, it's... Hmm. It feels too hard. It does. So it's really about being able to feel, you know, sit with it, feel the anxiety first. And it is a lot more pleasant when somebody comes in and says, I can see you're really distressed about whatever. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. There are great videos online from Professor Dan Siegel in particular about how the brain works.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And the idea that we have this downstairs brain, which is our survival brain and automatic, and it kicks into action to protect us. But it just runs amok as well. And then our upstairs brain, and he uses, I think, in some of the other videos they talked about the hand model of the brain, like our fist really. And the thumb and the wrist part is our... Yeah. Downstairs brain. That's the part of us that's survival, automatic stuff, like sleep and eating and... Breathing. And breathing. Yeah. And fight and flight responses. Right. Yeah. Because the anxiety is a signal that get, you know, you've got to protect yourself.

Yeah. And the upstairs brain is our thinking and reasoning and problem solving part of our brain. Right. But when we're in a crisis, what happens is we've just got to survive. Right. Yeah. So that stairway between the upstairs and downstairs sort of gets kind of cut off and we often flip our lids. Ah. So we're not thinking straight. Absolutely. You're not going to be able to take in any information or solve the problem in any way. So until we can do things to calm our kid's downstairs brain, we're not going to get anywhere. Yeah. And we do those things with some of those basic sort of physical things like sometimes just holding.

Yeah. A touch. Sometimes some sensory things. You know, have a cool drink. Right. Let's go and... As adults, let's go and make a cup of tea. You know. Doing some movement can be helpful sometimes. Getting them up and moving. Yeah. Getting them up and moving. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Or getting them out for a little walk or let's go and shoot some hoops while we think. Absolutely. While we work this out. Yeah. So doing some of those body things, physical things is really important. Then we can kind of start moving on to the thinking stuff. Right. So it starts with really basic things.

Name the feeling and this is Dan Siegel's whole brain child work and there's plenty online. Name the feelings to tame the feelings. Right. being able to externalise this is what's happening this is why this has happened let's just put that out there So as a parent, if your child was unable to name their feeling would you support them to find that feeling?

Definitely, and you can use feeling faces or you can use your words to help them find words that fit Absolutely Yeah, it's really helpful to understand that Definitely And then there's more thinking things we can start moving on to in terms of coaching them with some self-talk that it will pass you've done these brave things before and we're going to be able to do this again Riding that wave again Riding the wave again and then you can start thinking about the problem solving and inviting the kids into what could be helpful here Yeah So the third part of what we do is the action part what can we do to make it better and so basically as caregivers we're a coach we can't do it for them but we can be the cheerleader and we can give them some skills and teach them some skills and do the encouraging so we can do that and we really are trying to help them slowly in a way that's manageable face the fear and school refusals are really good examples so the sooner we can help them take steps towards rather than that natural inclination with anxiety to avoid the better because what we know is the more we avoid something the bigger the fear seems to get Absolutely and then we fear the fear more than the situation Certainly seen a lot of that with youth who have suddenly disconnected socially and then the thought of getting back out there with their friends is just so big Yeah Absolutely So then you know graded ways of thinking about what what could it might feel uncomfortable but it might be manageable and start with one step at a time and being the coach along the way Absolutely yeah Well that's great Thank you

6. When should I seek help

The final questions, which we've touched on a little bit already, when do I seek help and where do I seek help from? It would be really good to have a discussion about that. Yeah, so we talked about that when the distress feels like it's there so much of the time for our kids, that that's really important to seek help and it starts impacting on functioning. On holding them back from doing the things that

kids of their age should be able to do. So that's socialising. Social, getting to school, getting to sleep, eating properly. But the other thing that often happens with anxiety is that it impacts on the family too and the home.

Absolutely. And sometimes it's... Actually, it holds everybody hostage. So we end up, you know, that because of some of the rituals and the reassurance that the kid needs, we can't get out in the mornings to get to work on time or to get the other kids to school. It certainly makes it stressful for the whole family, doesn't it? That's right. Can't go out and... We invite people to the home because they get too stressed. So it does definitely impact on the family. And anxiety can make us, as parents, kind of sometimes respond in unhelpful ways too. It can help us. Sometimes it makes us collude with anxiety because we're so much trying to protect our child from experiencing any anxiety that we're rescuing them or doing a lot of things for them.

So they don't have to be exposed to it. And I guess as adults, you know, anxiety is uncomfortable. And we don't want our children to feel it either. So, you know... Natural instinct. But when we notice that we're doing that a lot of the time, lots of reassurance and actually setting everything up so just in case that they're not going to experience any anxiety, then it's starting to impact on everything in the home. And I guess going back to that school refusal again, that's one of those things where parents, you know, the young person might act out a lot about not wanting to go to school. So then, you know, parents trying to get off to work or trying to get the other children off to school, they'll just say, look, well, don't go to school then.

And you can see how the fight comes in too, you know, even with separation anxiety too and with school refusal that it starts out as being, you can see the distress. But then it becomes anxiety almost sort of bosses everybody around. And really... It gets quite angry and feisty and that's uncomfortable for the whole family. Absolutely. And what do I do then? It kind of controls the family a bit, doesn't it? Yeah, it takes control. Yeah, certainly a fair bit of that. Yeah. Yeah. And it's a funny thing. Anxiety makes us want to be in control but actually ends up controlling us, you know? Yeah. Yeah.

Dictating what we can and can't do. And the people around us. Yeah. Yeah. Fairly powerful, isn't it? So the sooner we can start, get in and start to work with it, the better. Absolutely. So I think, so we're talking about where can we go to get help. Yeah. And what kind of things can be helpful for parents in those times. I want to stress how important it is that parents, see themselves as a resource too. Absolutely. That what we do and the way we cope and the way we contain and hold and support is really, really vital. Parents as teachers really, isn't it? Yeah, that's right. So don't underestimate how much you can do as well.

And, and not to feel that I've got to do it either, that it's okay to, as parents to get some guidance on that too and support to do that. But otherwise, I guess it's, you're one of the people that often families will come to first in the general practices. Absolutely. So having health improvement practitioners and health coaches and GP practices can be a really great resource for families. Yeah. And it's free, they can just go and see their GP, the GP will refer them to the HIPAA health coach, and they can look at ways to manage, you know, some of those difficult situations. Really useful. Yeah.

But there are lots of resources out there. There are. So there's, there are some wonderful things on, online that the Mental Health Education and Research Centre, MIRC, have, have some wonderful resources. Wonderful video and reading material resources. There's some fantastic apps. There are great apps. For our youth out there which, we find youth quite like apps. They do. They do it so naturally, don't they? Absolutely. And some of those calm apps and breathing apps are really helpful. There's, you know, there's a lot of online support you can have as well. There is. I'm thinking there's a...

For youth in particular, there's quite a, a good website called Anxiety BC. I think it stands for sort of British Columbia. Okay. And they've got quite good visuals and you can click on different things and it takes you through what anxiety looks like and what you can do to help and it's very sort of youth friendly. So that's a useful resource. It's quite nice for youth because they like that sort of visual. Yeah. Yeah. And I've talked about the Hay Warrior book which is really lovely. Would that be for younger children? Oh, you said that you also use it for teenagers as well. I think it's aimed at, it looks like a picture book for younger kids but I've used, definitely used it with adolescents and they've loved it.

Yeah. Yeah. Just helping them understand what this is all about. Yeah. Yeah. What anxiety's all about. Yeah. Yeah. And that normalising, isn't it? It's normal to feel anxious. And to, to just normalise talking about feelings and, oh, I'm feeling anxious about something. I'm feeling anxious about this coming up. This, I've got an interview to go to and just making it, that's a really great teaching moment. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. Parents as first teachers really. Yeah. Yeah. And some movies, you know, the Inside Out movie has been a wonderful way of understanding feelings. Wow. And how feelings are, all have their place.

Right. And that it's okay to have feelings. Including anxiety. Including anxiety. Yep. Yeah. Yeah. And really, really about guarding against fearing fear itself rather than the situation. Because the feeling is so uncomfortable. And what we focus on grows. Yeah. It doesn't, if we really focus in on that anxiety and how it's making us feel. Yeah. You know, it gets bigger and bigger. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And I'm just, I think it was Karen Young in The Hay Warrior book talks about, there's a really lovely quote of something to the effect of, anxiety is really just a sign that we're going to do something really brave.

Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.