

Becoming a Worry Ninja

Parent/ Carer Booklet



Introduction

The 'Becoming a Worry Ninja' workshops are designed to develop all children's understanding of anxiety and to teach them tools and strategies for managing anxious thoughts and feelings.

This booklet will give you a brief overview of the information covered in each session, as well as copies of the handouts that will be given to your child.

It will be helpful for you to talk to your child about what they've learnt after each session to help consolidate their learning. It will also be useful for you to have an understanding of the content of the sessions so you can support your child to use the tools and strategies they have learnt.

Structure of the Y6 sessions

Sessions 1-3: January/February

Session 4: After Easter

This booklet provides a summary of what is covered in each session, with some suggestions on how you can support your child to manage worries specifically related to SATS and secondary school transition, or any other worries, at home.

Session One

What is anxiety?

We feel worried or anxious when we think something is a threat. This is completely normal, everyone experiences anxiety at some time, and different people feel anxious about different things.

Why do we experience anxiety?

When our bodies were first evolving, the things that were threatening to us were things that we needed to run away from or fight off, like wild animals. Because of this our bodies evolved to respond to threat in a particular way: when we sense danger our bodies jump into action to prepare us to either fight the danger or run away from it. This is called the **fight or flight response**.



The physical sensations we get in our bodies when we feel anxious are to do with our bodies preparing themselves to run away or fight. The diagram on the following page explains this in more detail.

The fight/ flight response is really helpful if there is danger that we need to run away from or fight off. For example, if you were crossing the road and you saw a car speeding towards you, you would need your body to be able to get you to safety as quickly as possible.

However nowadays some of the things that seem scary to us are things we don't need to run away from or fight off, like performing in a play. Even though we don't need to run away or fight, our body has the same response. The important thing to remember is: **even though the feelings are unpleasant, they aren't dangerous.**

Take Home Task

This week we asked your child to do two things at home:

1. Try and explain what you have learnt to a parent/carer.
2. Practice noticing what happens in your body when you're feeling worried or scared about something.

NB: It might be helpful to look through the body diagram on the following page with your child, and find out the explanation for the physical sensations they experience in their body when they're scared or anxious.

Fight Or Flight Response

When faced with a life-threatening danger it often makes sense to run away or, if that is not possible, to fight. The *fight or flight response* is an *automatic* survival mechanism which prepares the body to take these actions. All of the body sensations produced are happening for good reasons – to prepare your body to run away or fight – but may be experienced as uncomfortable when you do not know why they are happening.

Thoughts racing

Quicker thinking helps us to evaluate danger and make rapid decisions. It can be very difficult to concentrate on anything apart from the danger (or escape routes) when the fight or flight response is active

Changes to vision

Vision can become acute so that more attention can be paid to danger. You might notice 'tunnel vision', or vision becoming 'sharper'

Dry mouth

The mouth is part of the digestive system. Digestion shuts down during dangerous situations as energy is diverted towards the muscles

Heart beats faster

A faster heart beat feeds more blood to the muscles and enhances your ability to run away or fight

Nausea and 'butterflies' in the stomach

Blood is diverted away from the digestive system which can lead to feelings of nausea or 'butterflies'

Hands get cold

Blood vessels in the skin contract to force blood towards major muscle groups

Muscles tense

Muscles all over the body tense in order to get you ready to run away or fight. Muscles may also shake or tremble, particularly if you stay still, as a way of staying 'ready for action'

If we don't exercise (e.g. run away or fight) to use up the extra oxygen then we can quickly start to feel dizzy or lightheaded

Dizzy or lightheaded

Breathing becomes quicker and shallower

Quicker breathing takes in more oxygen to power the muscles. This makes the body more able to fight or run away

Adrenal glands release adrenaline

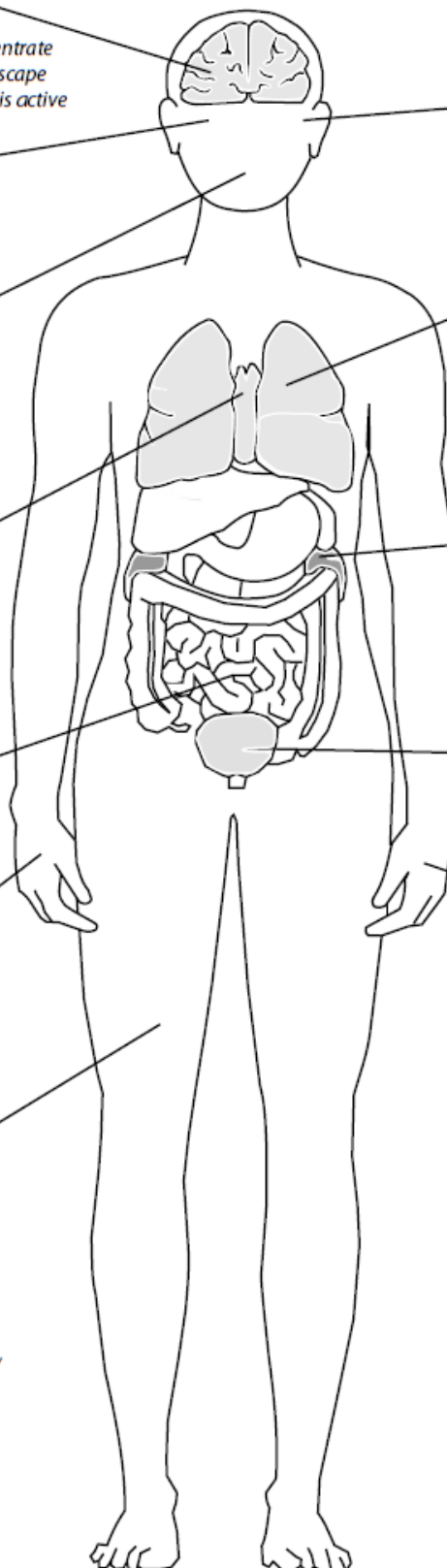
The adrenaline quickly signals other parts of the body to get ready to respond to danger

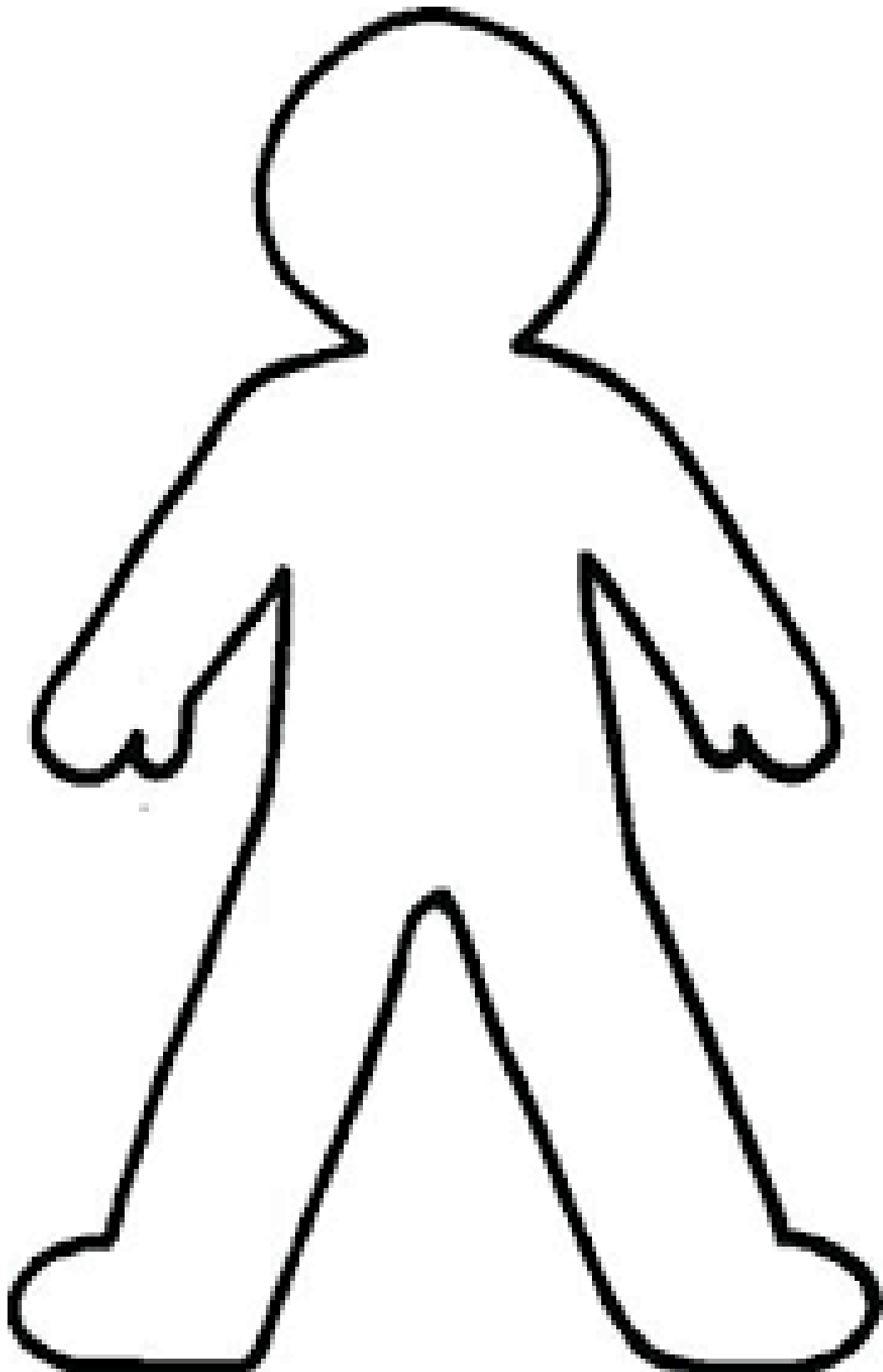
Bladder urgency

Muscles in the bladder sometimes relax in response to extreme stress

Palms become sweaty

When in danger the body sweats to keep cool. A cool machine is an efficient machine, so sweating makes the body more likely to survive a dangerous event





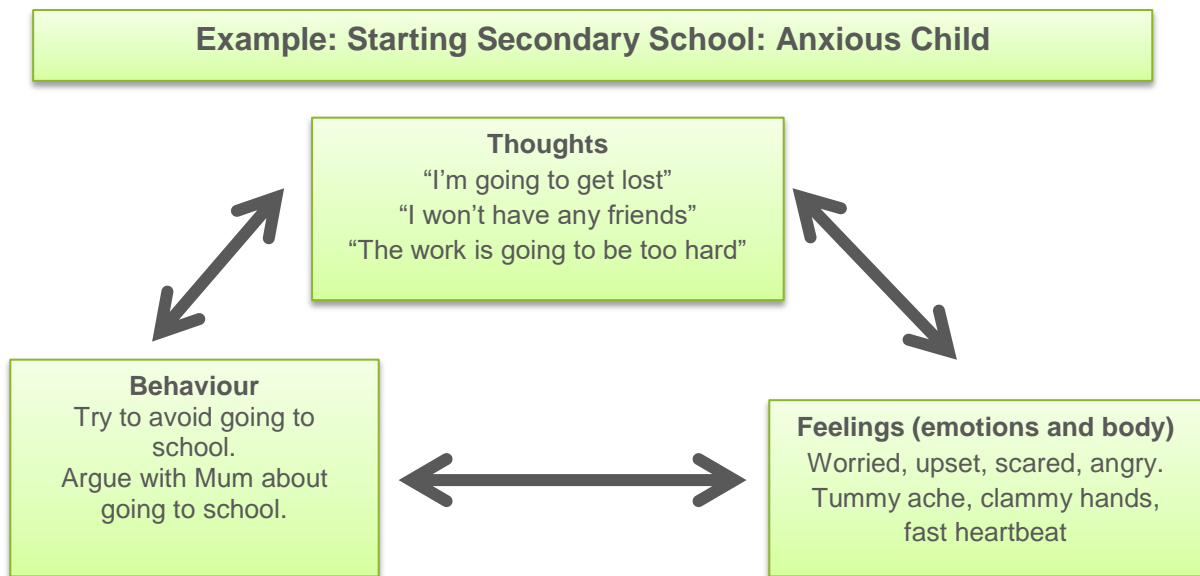
Session Two

The Worry Trap

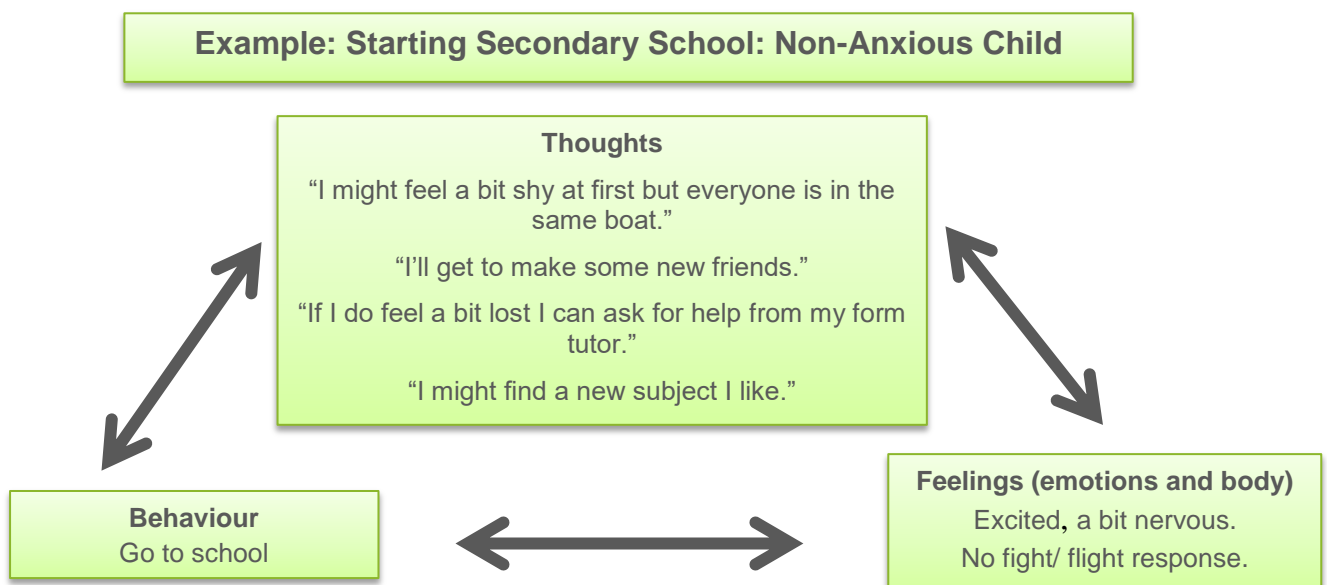
There are three components of anxiety:

- Anxious thoughts: overestimating danger (e.g. predicting something is going to be worse than it actually is, always jumping to the worst case scenario etc.) and underestimating our ability to cope (e.g. thinking if you get lost in a new school you won't be able to do anything about it).
- Anxious feelings: emotions (e.g. scared, sad, worried, angry) and physical sensations (e.g. headaches, nausea, shaking etc.).
- Anxious behaviour: trying to avoid the thing that is making you feel anxious.

These three factors all work together to maintain anxiety, as is demonstrated in the example of a worry cycle below:



Here is the same cycle, but with a child who isn't anxious:



MY CHILD'S ANXIOUS THOUGHTS

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

WHAT HE OR SHE IS THINKING:

WHAT HE OR SHE IS FEELING:

WHAT HE OR SHE DOES:

As we can see, the way we think about things and the way we behave can affect the way we feel. If we can change the way we think about things and change our behaviour around anxiety provoking situations, we can change the way we feel.

Behaviour

Children often try to avoid the things that make them feel anxious. However if a child always avoids the thing that makes them feel anxious they never get the opportunity to 1) learn that it wasn't as bad as they thought it was going to be 2) learn that they can cope with it 3) develop coping skills to be able to manage the situation. This means the anxiety is maintained.

This is why it's really important to encourage children to be brave and face the things that make them feel anxious. This should always be done gradually to make it more manageable for the child. For example, if a child was scared of dogs you might support them to take the following steps: look at pictures of dogs, watch fun videos of dogs, walk past a friendly dog that is being held by its owner, be in the same room as a friendly dog that is being held by its owner, stroke a friendly dog that is being held by its owner, etc.

Thoughts

Anxious thoughts are often exaggerated and unhelpful but because they feel real we often accept them as true without challenging them. This can cause us to become stuck in a trap where we remain anxious about something that might never happen. In order to conquer our worries we need to fight them back. Within the group we used the analogy of a ninja to illustrate how to do this...

Thinking like a ninja is about trying to come up with more realistic and helpful things to tell yourself that would make you feel better.

Top Tips:

- Your child can do on their own or with someone else (ninja back up squad). They can write the worry down in a table like the one on the next page, do it in their heads, or do it in conversation with someone else.
- To help them identify what they are worried about, it may help if you ask them questions such as "what are you worried will/won't happen?" " what would be the worst thing about that?"
- Thinking like a ninja may not work straight away, but the more your child uses it the bigger the impact it will have on their anxious thinking. It will be helpful to encourage your child to practice, and to prompt them to think like a ninja would if they are ever worrying about something.
- One of the best ways to challenge a thought is to test it out and see what actually happens. If your child tests out their worry and it does come true, focus on how brave they were to face their fear, and help them think about what helped them cope in the situation and how they can use those coping strategies again.

Take Home Task

This week we asked your child to practice thinking like a ninja at home. If there is nothing that is making them feel worried, they can practice by asking you/someone else and then they can say what the ninja might say.



HELPFUL THOUGHTS WORKSHEET

SITUATION SATS	
Anxious Thoughts "I'm going to fail" "I won't manage secondary school" "Everyone will think I'm stupid"	Helpful Thoughts <i>What would the ninja say to make you feel less worried?</i> "I can try my best" "I can let an adult know if I feel worried" "It's okay to feel worried"
SITUATION	
Anxious Thoughts	Helpful Thoughts <i>What would the ninja say to make you feel less worried?</i>
SITUATION	
Anxious Thoughts	Helpful Thoughts <i>What would the ninja say to make you feel less worried?</i>
SITUATION	
Anxious Thoughts	Helpful Thoughts <i>What would the ninja say to make you feel less worried?</i>
SITUATION	
Anxious Thoughts	Helpful Thoughts <i>What would the ninja say to make you feel less worried?</i>

PROMPTS FOR PARENTS/CARERS

WHAT IS HAPPENING	WHAT IS HE OR SHE	EVIDENCE AND ALTERNATIVES	WHAT HAPPENED IN THE END
	<p><i>Why are you worried?</i> <i>What do you think will happen? What is it about [this situation] that is making you worried?</i></p>	<p><i>What makes you think that [this situation] will happen?</i> <i>Has that ever happened to you before? Have you ever seen that happen to someone else?</i> <i>How likely is it that [this situation] will happen?</i> <i>From what has happened before or to other people, what do you think will happen?</i> <i>What would you think was happening if someone else was in the same boat?</i> <i>What would [another child] think if they were in this situation?</i> <i>How could you test out this thought?</i></p>	<p><i>What did your child think? What did your child do?</i> <i>How did your child feel?</i></p>

Session Three

Relaxation

When we're in a situation that makes us feel really anxious (e.g. standing at the front of the class about to give a speech) or feeling really overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety, it might not be possible to think like a ninja. In these situations it can be helpful to try out some relaxation techniques instead. In session three we got your child to practice the relaxation techniques on the following page

Muscle Relaxation

Squeeze a lemon!



Imagine you have a lemon in your hand. Squeeze it really really tight. Think about how your hands and arms feel.

Count to 5... and relax. How do they feel now?

Stretch like a giraffe!



Imagine you are as tall as a giraffe. Stretch your arms and your legs as far as you can. Think about how they feel.

Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?

Hide in your shell!



Imagine you are a little snail and have a shell on your back. Lift your shoulders up and pull your shell up as high as you can. Think about how your shoulders, your neck and your back feel.

Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?

Wiggle your toes in the sand!



Imagine you standing on the beach and you have the sand under your toes. Wiggle your toes and push down into the sand as far as you can. How do they feel when you are wiggling them?

Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?

Squeeze through a tunnel!



Imagine you are crawling through a small play tunnel. You have to make yourself tiny to fit. Breathe in and hold your stomach. How does your stomach feel? How does your back feel?

Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?

Controlled Breathing

- ❖ Put one hand on your tummy.
- ❖ Imagine you are sniffing some flowers; breathe them in slowly while you count to 7. You will feel your hand rising.
- ❖ Hold the breath and count to 2.
- ❖ Release your breath slowly and count to 11 .
- ❖ Practise!



Top tips!

- It's important for your child to practice relaxation techniques when they're not feeling anxious so it's easier for them to remember what to do when they do need to use them.
- Different things work for different people; some people find muscle relaxation really helpful whilst others prefer controlled breathing.
- There are lots of other ideas for relaxation techniques online. If your child doesn't find progressive muscle relaxation or controlled breathing works for them, it might be helpful to do some research and try out some other ideas.
- During Session Three we asked the class to share ideas about the things they do to relax. Try asking your child if they heard any good ideas that they'd like to try.
- Your child may have already found something else that helps them to relax e.g. listening to music, stroking a pet, talking to someone about what is making them feel anxious. It's useful to ask your child what they find helpful, so you can support them to use their relaxation techniques when they're feeling anxious.

Session Four (after Easter break)

When we feel anxious our instinct is often to avoid or escape the situation. If we avoid or escape the situation our anxiety reduces quickly. However, if we are faced with the same threat again we will once again feel very anxious. Sometimes our anxiety even increases over time. We also fail to learn that we can cope with anxious feelings. Avoidance can very quickly become a vicious cycle as we assume the only way to reduce or anxiety is to avoid or escape from the situations which we perceive to be threatening or dangerous.

Even though it feels scary at first, when you face your worries they become less scary and you get better at conquering them. By breaking things down into small steps and gradually facing the situations you fear you can overcome your avoidance and learn to cope with anxiety. You can support your child to face their fears in a gradual and manageable way, rather than avoiding them. We used the example of a time when your child has faced a scary situation (e.g. starting secondary school) and what has made this feel more scary and manageable.

Top Tips for Responding to my Child's Anxious Behaviour

Parental responses to children's anxious behaviour can have a huge impact. By using some of the following techniques, you can help your child build up their brave behaviour and develop their confidence in coping with and overcoming their fears.

Children find attention and praise very rewarding. The more brave behaviour is noticed and praised, the more children are likely to do it.

- ★ **Don't reassure** – this encourages children to rely on someone else to tell them whether a situation is safe or do-able before they will try it. Often, the more reassurance you give, the more reassurance your child will seek. Instead, you can show empathy and understanding by acknowledging their difficulties and commenting on their ability to cope (i.e. "I can see that this really worries you, but I'm proud of you for having a go")
- ★ **Ask them to evaluate their thoughts and help them find alternative ones**
- ★ **Use specific praise to acknowledge times they are being brave** (i.e. "You went into class today when you were running a bit late. I know that must have been scary for you but you didn't let it stop you. I'm really proud of how well you managed that.")
- ★ **Use rewards** to encourage children to overcome the initial anxiety about taking steps towards achieving their goal. They don't have to be expensive, often spending time with your child and doing a valued activity with them can be the most
- ★ **Model brave behaviour yourself and encourage other family members/friends too**
- ★ **Step back and let them 'have a go'** – fight your instinct to step in and encourage your child to confront their fears and develop their independence



Top Tips for Step-by-Step Plans

Creating a plan:

1. Think of the end goal.
2. Come up with steps towards reaching that goal (up to 10). It's helpful to write these on post it notes or small pieces of card.
3. Get your child to rate out of ten how anxiety provoking they think each step will be.
4. Order the cards from least anxiety provoking to most anxiety provoking. The end goal will be at the top. This is your step by step plan.
5. With your child, think of rewards for each step. Refer to handout 6 'Praise and Rewards' for ideas.
6. Get your child to think of helpful thoughts for each step.
7. Be creative- decorate the step by step plan with your child.

Implementing a plan:

1. Start with the least anxiety provoking step. This should be fairly manageable for your child.
2. Your child should stay in the anxiety provoking situation until their anxiety reduces. Prompt them to remember their helpful thought for the step.
3. Follow through with the reward for the step as soon as possible.
4. If the child is unable to complete the step, praise them for trying.
5. Repeat this step until your child no longer finds it anxiety provoking (it may be helpful to get them to rate how anxiety provoking they think the step will be before each time. When the child rates it as roughly 4/10 they are ready to move on).
6. Move onto the next step. Each step should be **prolonged** and **repeated**.
7. If your child is unable to move onto the next step, break it down into smaller steps.

When your child is facing their fear, look out for signs of avoidance and encourage the use of coping strategies such as deep breathing (breathe in through your nose for 7 seconds and out for 11) , reminders of rewards and specific praise and empathy to support them.



GOAL	HELPFUL THOUGHT	REWARD
------	-----------------	--------

10 (ULTIMATE GOAL)

9

8

7

6

5

4

3

2

1 (EASIEST STEP)