KidsMatter have launched a new enewsletter specifically for parents, carers and families. It's packed full of expert information, tips and strategies to help you support the mental health and wellbeing of your kids. The following information is taken from Issue 4, Helping children manage emotions.

Learning to conquer fears and worries

From monsters hiding under the bed to creepy crawlies and wild weather, children can be scared of all sorts of things, real and imagined. While these fears may seem unreasonable to adults, they’re very real to children. Who hasn’t looked under the bed for an imaginary monster that elicits just as much fear as a live animal?

Fears change throughout childhood. Babies might be afraid of loud noises and strangers; toddlers of being on their own or invisible creatures; and school-age children of real things that might happen such as being hurt.

Like anger, fear is a normal emotion and can actually help us to prepare for danger – it makes us alert and ready to take action. But unlike anger, it’s not always easy to tell when children are frightened or worried. They might be embarrassed about sharing their feelings and instead communicate their fear through lack of confidence to do things they happily did before, sleeping difficulties and complaining of tummy aches or headaches.

Kids need adult support to learn to cope with fears and the good news is there’s lots you can do to help:

- Acknowledge how your child is feeling and name it. Saying your child is feeling scared or worried can help them to see it as a normal emotion that can be overcome.
- Tell stories about how you learned to overcome fears when you were their age. Perhaps you mustered the courage to look under the bed for the monster or watch lightning in the sky during a storm.
- Ask what their favourite hero might do in the same situation. Would Spiderman be afraid of monsters under the bed?

School children (Click on the following links for further information)

- Coping with fears and worries
- About fears and worries
- Everyone gets scared
- Fears and helpful self-talk
- Fears and worries: Other resources
Anxiety

Fearful and anxious behaviour is common in children. Some children can become more anxious than others and experience difficulty coping with a range of normal fears and anxieties.

Professional help might be needed if a child’s anxiety stops them from joining in at school or in social activities, or stops them doing things that other children their age do easily.

Learn more about worrying and anxieties below.

School children (Click on the following links for further information)

- About anxiety
- What does anxiety look like?
- Anxiety: Suggestions for families

Children with anxiety difficulties tend to see the world as a scary place. They can be overly sensitive to their feelings and lack confidence in their own ability.

How you can help

Parents and other adults can help by supporting children to be brave. In order to be brave children need to have skills for understanding and managing their feelings. They need to learn about helpful thinking that they can use to encourage themselves to have a go, and they need to gradually build up their confidence by taking on small challenges.

Help to recognise and understand anxiety

A first step in helping children gain some control over anxiety is recognising when it occurs and how it affects them.

Model helpful coping

Being a good model involves showing children how to cope with emotions (not just telling them). Show children with anxiety how you use helpful self-talk in a difficult situation (eg “This looks a bit scary, but I’ll give it a go”).

Discourage avoidance

Sometimes when children say they feel sick, they are describing feeling anxious. It is important that children do not avoid things like school or homework unnecessarily.
Praise having a go

Encourage children with anxiety to attempt new things and praise them for trying. It is very important to emphasise trying rather than success when anxiety is an area of difficulty.

Introduce challenges gradually

Children build strength and resilience by learning to face challenges. It is important to begin with small challenges that children can meet. For example, a child who is frightened of dogs might start by walking past the house when the dog is barking without having to cross the road. This improves confidence for taking on more challenging steps.

Start small

Help the child to choose goals for becoming braver and to take small steps towards achieving them. Celebrate his or her success at each step. Experiencing even small successes helps to reduce anxiety.

Practise coping skills

Practise using coping strategies for challenging situations. Help children talk about problems and support them to come up with possible solutions.

Try not to get angry

If a child simply refuses to do something even after you have encouraged him/her and broken the task into steps, it may simply be overwhelming at that time. Sometimes, you need to back off and praise the child for doing as much as he or she could. Later, try again with smaller steps and encourage your child to have a go, one small step at a time.

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