



Parent Masterclass Series 2026

Understanding Anxiety: Practical Tools for Parents and Carers



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- 6:05pm** **Anxiety Overview**
Dr Tessa Opie
- 6:15pm** **Building Emotional Regulation Skills at Home**
Ms Sarah Ferguson
- 6:35pm** **Helping Your Child Manage Anxiety**
Mr Chris Clements
- 6:55pm** **Supporting Children to Overcome Avoidance**
Ms Libby Hartley
- 7:15pm** **Panel Discussion – Q&A**



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Take care.



Understanding Anxiety

Definition

- **A neurobiological and psychological response to perceived threat, uncertainty, or anticipated harm.**
- **A protective function**
- **Normal anxiety vs. Anxiety Disorder**
- **Anxiety exists on a continuum – diagnosis occurs when it is meaningfully disrupting a person's life.**



Understanding Anxiety

Prevalence

- **Most common mental health condition globally and nationally.**
- **Among children and adolescents, 7% of 4 to 17-year-olds will experience an anxiety disorder.**
- **1 in 3 Australian adolescents will experience a clinically significant anxiety disorder by age 17.**
- **Females diagnosed at twice the rate of males.**



Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety Disorders

- Generalised Anxiety Disorder
- Social Anxiety Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Specific Phobias
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Agoraphobia
- Selective Mutism

**** Note:** *OCD and PTSD have separate classification due to distinct features, neurobiological profiles and treatment responses.*



Understanding Anxiety

Four Interconnected Domains

- Physical symptoms – pounding heart, shortness of breath, chest tightness, dry mouth, nausea, stomach discomfort, light-headedness, sweating, trembling or shaking, muscle tension, headaches, and fatigue.
- Cognitive symptoms – overestimation of threat, underestimation of coping capacity, catastrophising, difficulty concentrating, mind going blank.
- Behavioural symptoms – avoidance, withdrawal from activities, procrastination, reassurance seeking, clinging to routine, school refusal.
- Emotional symptoms – persistent feelings of dread, apprehension, being on edge, irritability, a sense of detachment, emotional numbing, inability to cope with stress or discomfort.



Understanding Anxiety

The Fear Circuit

Threat is detected → cortisol and adrenaline → fight/flight/freeze/fawn

Then the prefrontal cortex plays a regulatory role, appraising whether the threat is genuinely dangerous.

In anxiety disorders, the prefrontal regulation is disrupted and unable to down-regulate the fear response.

The prefrontal cortex does not reach full maturity until the mid-20s.

Children and adolescents are neurologically primed for heightened threat responses and reduced capacity for self-regulation.



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Building Emotional Regulation Skills at Home

Sarah Ferguson



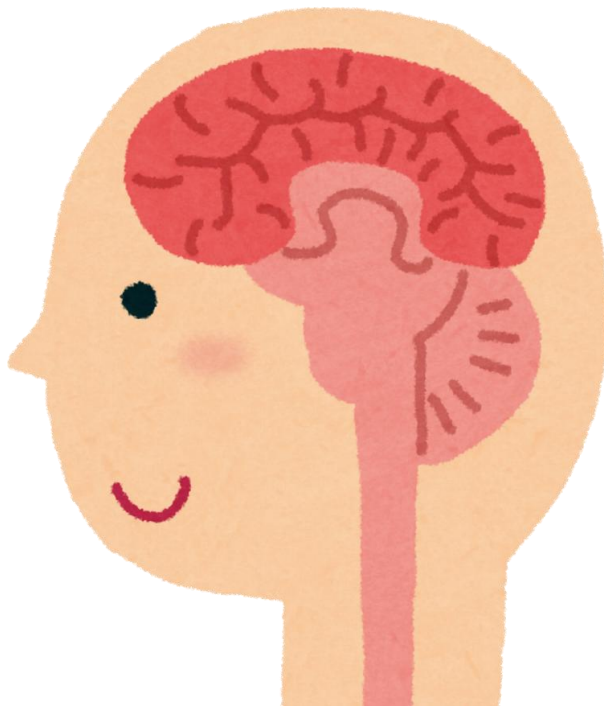
Your child isn't giving you a hard time. They're having a hard time.

Ross Greene Collaborative Problem-Solving Model



Hand Model

Dan Siegel





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When the Lid Flips Burnt Toast or House on Fire?



Activated Nervous Systems

Stephen Porgas' Poly Vagal Theory



Body Maps

Noticing how big emotions feel in our bodies

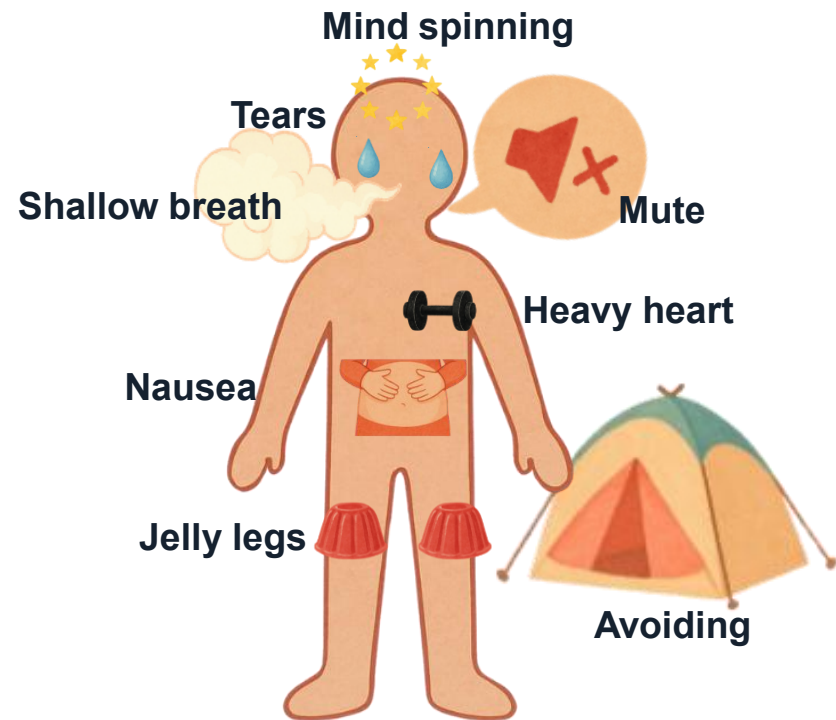
What emotions do you notice?

Where do you feel them in your body?

Are they heavy, buzzing, foggy, tight, floppy?

What thoughts visit?

What words show up?



**When we understand our body map,
we can pay attention when the feelings show up.**



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Connect then Correct Co-regulation.



Fire Fighters

Clearing the smoke.





Breath Work

Intentional Breathing



In for 4, hold for 5, out for 6

Dragon breaths

Box breathing

Finger breaths

Big Body Movement

Time to move

Movement tells our nervous system that we fought the fire or ran for shelter and now we are safe.





Water and Ice

Dive Reflex



Face plunge
Cool shower
Drink ice water



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The Fire Blanket

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

5 minutes to calm





Resources

Parenting Tool Kit

Book for You

- 10 Things I Wish You Knew About Your Child's Mental Health – Billy Garvey
- The Whole-Brain Child – Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson

Book Sets for Your Child

- Hey Warrior, Ups and Downs, Hey Awesome – Karen Young
- My Calm Me Down Book, When I'm Feeling .. – Trace Moroney
- Wildling Books (Various)
- Now Maps, Now Maps Jnr – Dr Dan Siegel

Podcast

- Pop Culture Parenting (Dr Billy Garvey)



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Helping Your Child Manage Anxiety: Practical Tools **Mr Chris Clements**



Outline

1. How anxiety shows up in our thinking
2. Strategy 1 – Validate the feeling not the fear
3. Strategy 2 –notice and name the story
4. Strategy 3 – Checking the thought
5. Strategy 4 – Choosing a Values-based brave step
6. Parent Script

From “body alarm” to the “worry story”

Bottom-up (how we feel):

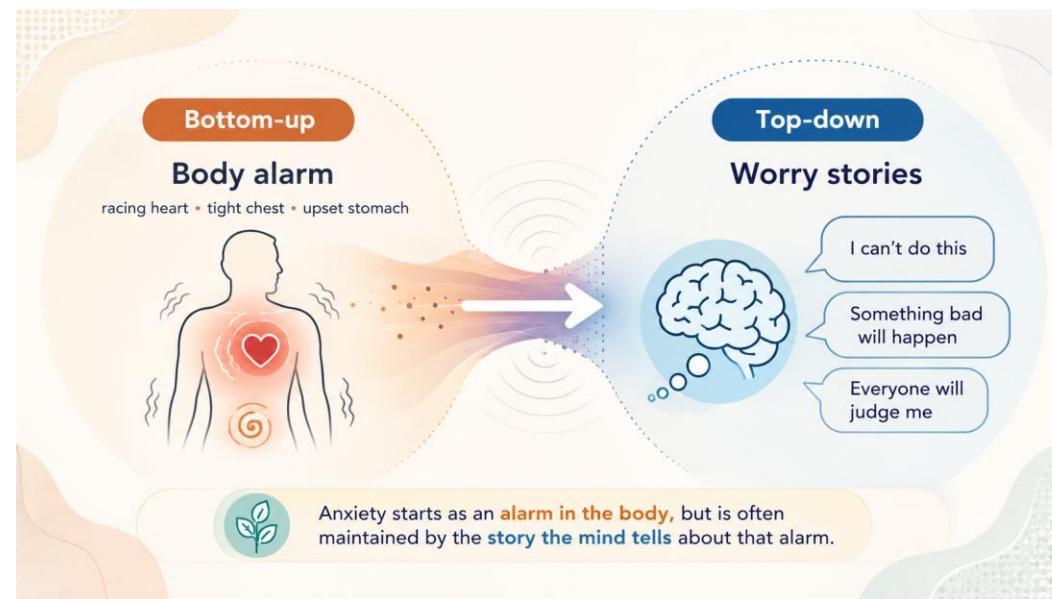
Body alarm = racing heart, tight chest, upset stomach, restlessness

Top-down (how we think):

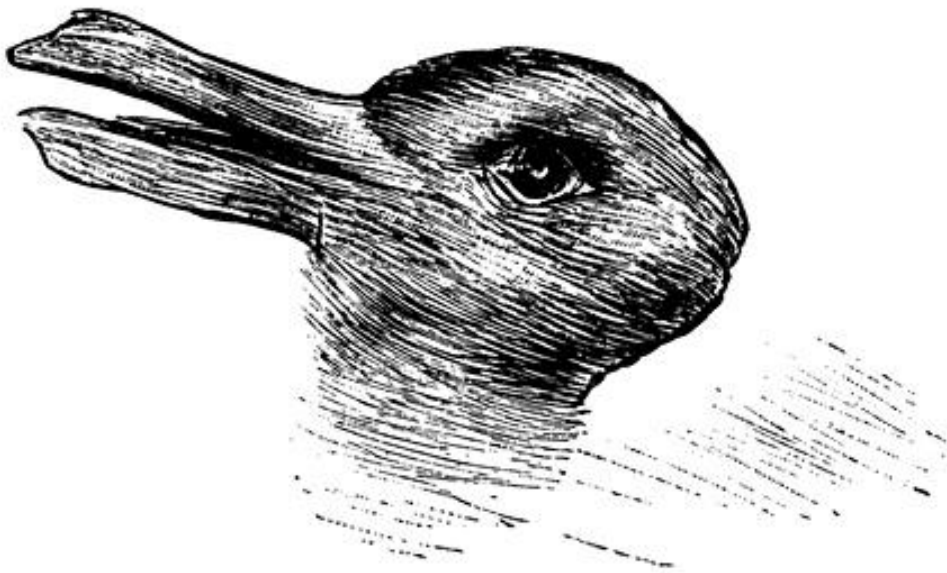
The Mind’s story = “I’m going to mess this up,” “They are laughing at me,” “my stomach is churning, this is not a safe situation”

Parent role:

Help children pause, name the worry, check the thought, and choose values based actions.

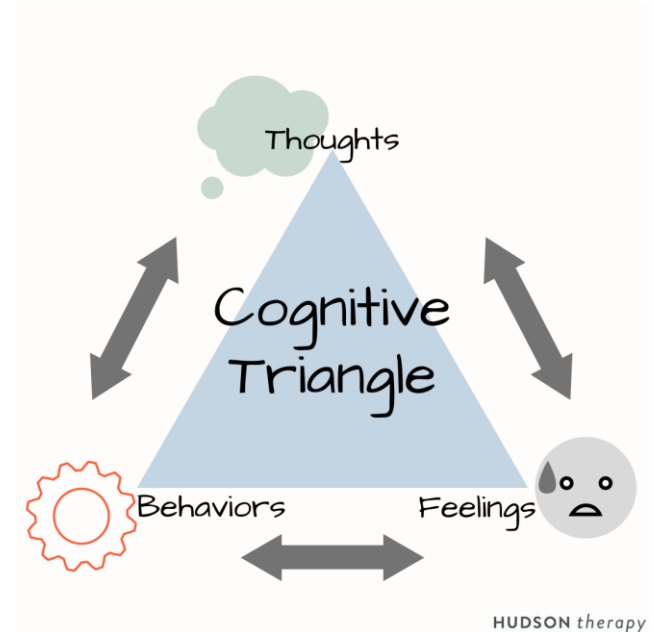


Our brains are not cameras..



Anxious thoughts feel like facts

- Children use very specific language e.g., “Everyone will laugh at me”, “I must get an A”
- Only seeing part of the illusion “the threatening part”
- CBT = the way I interpret (thought) a situation changes how I feel, and how I feel influences what I do next
- ACT = we do not have to believe/ obey every thought that we have



Strategy I – Validate the feeling not the fear

How We Respond Matters

What we say can help our children feel safe, understood, and more confident facing their worries.

 Less helpful	vs.	 More helpful
 “Don’t worry.”		 “I can see this feels really hard.”
 “You’ll be fine.”		 “Your worry is telling you something bad might happen.”
 “There’s nothing to be scared of.”		 “I believe you can take the next step.”

 Connection. Validation. Confidence. That’s what helps kids grow. 



Experiential Exercise – Naming the worry

Fusion = becoming entangled with your thoughts, beliefs, inner critic

Defusion = an uncoupling from these thoughts

Try this with a worry thought:

- 1. Write or think of a worry – focus intensely on this & notice how it makes you feel**
- 2. Add: I’m having the thought that...” and repeat several times**
- 3. Add: “I Notice I’m having the thought that... “ and repeat several times**
- 4. Notice: does the thought feel slightly different?**



Strategy 2 – Notice and name the worry story

We can help them say:

- “My worry is telling me...”
- “I’m having the thought that...”

For younger children:

- That sounds like your worry monster talking
- Sounds like your danger brain is really switched on

Key: the thought becomes something the child notices, rather than something they have to automatically believe



Strategy 3 – Check the thought ‘gently’

Avoid a debate with the child’s anxiety – this can lead to defensiveness of the worry

Invite curiosity

Questions you might ask:

- “What else might be true?”
- “Is this fact, feeling or a worry prediction?”
- “What would you say to a friend who had this thought?”
- “What has happened to you before when you have felt this way?”

Goal = We are trying to help the child move from an absolute, threat-based thinking to more flexible thinking.



Strategy 4 – Choose a values-based brave step

Anxiety asks, “How do I stay safe?” Values ask, “what matters enough to try?”

Worry story

“They won’t want me there.”

“I’ll get it wrong.”

“I’ll let the team down.”

Value

Friendship / belonging

Learning / growth

Teamwork / commitment

Small brave step

Say hello to one person

Try the first question

Turn up and warm up with the group

Brave actions are not about proving anxiety wrong. They are about moving toward something important, even when anxiety is present.

Older Children: Even with worry here, what is one small action that moves you toward the kind of person you want to be?

Younger Children: What would brave do next?



The parent script

When anxiety shows up:

- 1. Validate:** “I can see this feel really hard”
- 2. Name:** “Your worry is telling you something bad will happen.”
- 3. Check:** “What else might be true?”
- 4. Identify and Act:** “Identify the value and take on small brave step.”



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Supporting Children to Overcome Avoidance **Ms Libby Hartley**



What is School Refusal/ School Can't?

Difficulty attending school due to emotional distress

Can range from....

- Reluctance to attend
- Missing certain classes
- Complete refusal to attend

Key Insight

- Students often want to attend but feel unable to cope
- This is not a choice – it is an emotional response to distress



What It Can Look Like

Signs to watch for at home and at school

- Leaving class
- Avoiding school work or starting at tasks without starting
- Wanting to stay home on school days
- Frequent Visits to the nurse or wellbeing room
- Panic attacks or emotional shutdowns
- Complaints of headache or stomach aches



Why Does Avoidance Happen?

Understanding the root causes helps us respond with compassion

- **Anxiety or worry about school**
- **Bullying or friendship difficulties**
- **Academic pressure or fear of failure**
- **Sensory overwhelm**
- **Transitions or changes in routine**
- **Feeling unsafe or unsupported at school**



What parents & Carers Can Do

Helpful responses to support your child

- Stay calm and supportive – your calm models calm for your child
- Listen without judgement and create a safe space for sharing
- Validate feelings: “That sounds really hard for you”
- Keep routines predictable – consistency reduces anxiety
- Break tasks into smaller steps and praise effort along the way
- Work with the school – partnership between home and school is powerful



What Helps at Home

Daily foundations are coping strategies

- Consistent morning routines
- Good sleep habits
- Treat every day as a fresh start
- Reduce overwhelm where possible

Encourage coping strategies

- Music
- Movement & exercise
- Breathing exercises
- Safe comfort items



When to Seek Extra Support

If anxiety or avoidance is significantly impacting daily life

- School and Wellbeing team
- Psychologist
- Head space
- Paediatrician



Take away points

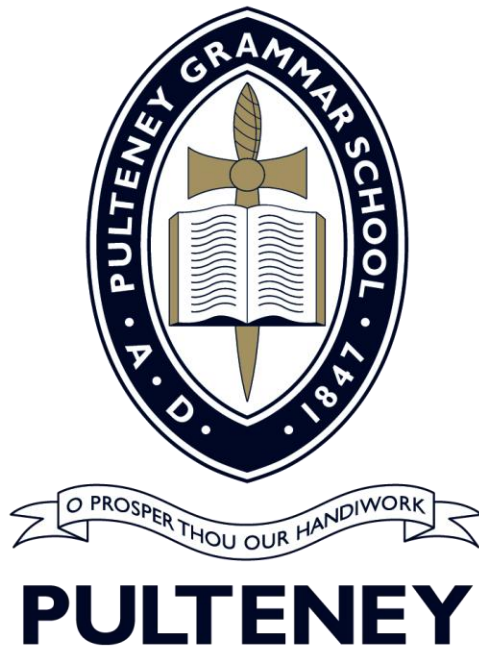
- **Avoidance makes sense**
- **Gradual, supported exposure helps rebuild confidence**
- **Small steps forward**
- **Support is key**



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Panel Discussion



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