

## Supporting an Anxious Child

Due to COVID 19 Children may have been spending a lot of time at home and not seeing family, friends, and familiar adults. You may have noticed a change in their behaviour or sleep pattern. Returning to nursery, childminders or school may cause feelings of anxiety and stress for some children.

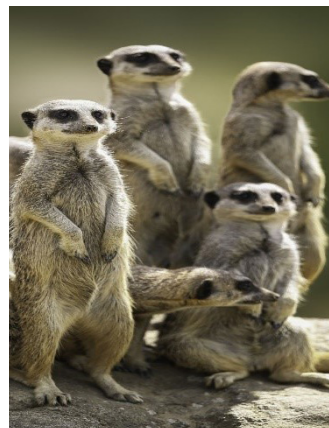
Talk to children about feelings, help them to name their feeling. Encourage them to tell you what the feeling feels like and where do they feel it? Do they feel it in their tummy, does it make their tummy sore? in their chest, head...? does it make them feel hot and sweaty? Tell them it's ok to feel sad, angry, scared, frustrated... there are no bad feelings all feelings are ok. Explain that these feelings are only coming to visit, they will only stay a while and then they will go again.

## Our Meerkat Brain

To help children understand why they might feel some of these strong emotions, explain how our brain works (in a child friendly way) perhaps using puppets.

For example, the part of our brain called the Amygdala, (meerkat) which is our internal alarm system and responsible for our fight, flight or freeze response.

Just like a meerkat the amygdala is on alert looking around for any dangers around us. When it notices any danger for example, if there was a big Tiger coming towards us it would jump up and alert us to run away and keep safe. So, our meerkat brain is very important.



But sometimes our meerkat jumps up on alert when it thinks there is danger, but it's a false alarm there is no danger, but he doesn't know this because he doesn't understand words it only understands feelings. When our meerkat is on alert, it can make us feel angry, scared, or anxious. Our tummies might hurt, we might feel hot and sweaty, we might cry, or shout and feel upset. We might find it hard to concentrate and listen to what people are telling us. And we might say or do things that we don't really mean.

So, we need to help the meerkat brain (amygdala) to know we are ok and to stay calm when there is no danger.

Below are some coping tips for helping children calm their meerkat when big feelings come to visit ...

## Calm Jar

Make a calm jar together. You will need a jar with a lid, glitter (you can buy biodegradable glitter) water and some glue.

Fill the jar with the water and glue. Ask your child what colour each feeling that they have might be e.g. happy =yellow, angry =red. Let them add the different colours of glitter to the jar. They may also like to add other shiny bits and bobs into the jar. When you have added all the different feelings to the jar, put the lid tightly on (you may want to glue the lid on so that your child can't take it off).



Give the jar a shake and watch the glitter swirl round and round. Explain to your child this is like all our feelings mixed up inside us, sometimes we need to take a moment to let them settle. You might like to sit there or laydown on your tummy together and watch the glitter settling. As you sit/lay there together, start taking a slow deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. Watch to see if your child begins to mirror what you are doing!

## Mindful breathing exercise

Teaching children fun deep breathing exercise stimulates the nervous system and helps them to feel calm and relaxed. By focusing on their breath this helps to distract them from anxious thoughts and feelings.

Doing a few breathing exercises as part of a child's bedtime routine can help to calm and relax your child before bed. These techniques should be practised regularly and when the child is calm and happy. That way they will be learning to use them, for whenever they might need to.



- **Belly breathing** – Put on some relaxing music. Ask your child to choose a breathing buddy (small soft toy or small favourite toy) Find somewhere warm and comfortable and ask your child to lay down, place their breathing buddy on their tummy. Take a breath in through the nose 1,2,3 and out through your mouth 1,2,3. Tell your child to watch his breathing buddy go up and down, as they breath in and out....
- **Snake Breath** – Put your lips together like you are going to suck through a straw, take a breath in... and then as you breath out make a long hisssssssssing sound.



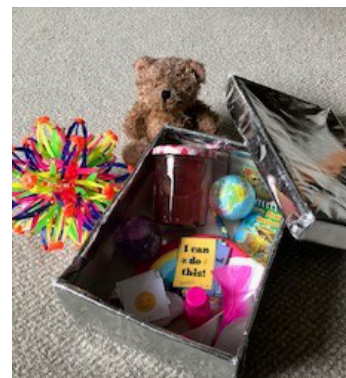
- **Humming bee breath** – Humming bee breath can help relieve anxiety and has a calming effect on the nervous system. Begin in comfortable sitting position, sit up with a straight back. Ask your child to close their eyes and cover both ears with their hands. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose and breathe out with your lips lightly together, make a “Hummm mm, sound.
- **Balloon breath** – Put your hands together in front of you, take a breath in through your nose, as you breathe out through your mouth, start to open your hands into a balloon shape getting bigger and bigger as you exhale. Repeat, but this time as you blow up your balloon, tell your child to put all their worries into the balloon and watch them float away...

## Calm Box

Make a calm box with your child. To make a box you could use a shoe box and encourage your child to decorate it. They could paint it, stick pictures on, let them be creative, whatever they want it to look like it's their personal calm box .... If you have space, you could make a chill out area for them to go to when they feel they need time to relax and have a moment for themselves.

Encourage your child to use their calm box each day. The more they use the content of the box when they are calm, the more they will become familiar with what helps them feel calm when needing a little time for themselves.

Ideas to put in the calm box/ area



### Ideas to put in the calm box/ area

- Calming music, you may like to put some headphones for them to listen to the music
- A calm jar or snow globe
- Cosy blanket
- Favourite books or audio books
- Stress ball
- Fidget toys
- Puzzles
- Colouring paper and pens
- Favourite soft toy for them to cuddle
- Some Lego bricks
- A few pictures of simple yoga poses that they are familiar with
- Pictures of different emotions so they can recognise how they are might be feeling
- Include props to help them practise breathing techniques such as blowing bubbles, a coloured feather, or a pinwheel
- Lavender scented playdough
- Hand puppet
- Photos that will trigger happy memories
- Different textured bits of fabric

Please ensure anything that is put in the calm box is safe for children to use.

## Humming a Tune

Humming can have a calming effect on our body. When you notice yourself or your child becoming anxious or big feelings come to visit, hum a tune to yourself. Try to encourage your child to join in.

- Play a game of guess the nursery rhyme -hum a tune to a nursery rhyme that children are familiar with and see if they can guess what you are humming. Encourage them to have a turn humming a nursery rhyme.
- Try doing it with your hand over your ears and with your eyes closed.



## Exercise

Do some daily family exercises together. Physical exercise stimulates endorphins (feel good chemicals) into your body and is good for our mental health and well-being.

- Take a walk-in nature.
- Try a family yoga class. Yoga can be especially helpful as part of a bedtime routine.
- Put on some music and have a dance party. You could dress up for the event. Try different types of music, fast/slow, and see how they move their body to the music.
- Go swimming.
- Do some gardening-give your child their very own veg patch. Encourage them to plant some veg and be responsible for watering it regularly. If you don't have a garden, you can use a grow bag or just put some pots on a windowsill.



## Happy/thankful jar

Make a family thankful jar. Plan a convenient time each evening to all sit down together and take turns saying what you are thankful for that day. Write them on post-it notes and then put them in the jar. This is a nice activity for all the family to look back at the things you all wrote at a later date.

For your younger children you could also make a happy jar (you could use a jar, box or a tin) Encourage your child to decorate the jar with things that make them happy (you could draw a few smiley faces on). Every evening ask your child what has made them happy today (they might need a little encouragement) write in down on a piece of paper, encourage your child to fold it up and to put the happy thought in their jar. Make this part of their bedtime routine. Then their last thought they have before going to sleep, will be a happy thought.



## Guided Meditation

Meditation helps calm the mind and body. So, bedtime is a great time to try some meditation with your little ones. Turn down the lights, put on some soft calming music, and give them time to get their wriggles out, snuggle up and become comfortable.

Invite them to close their eyes if they would like to. When you are both ready, read a meditation together. Read it slowly with a calm soft voice. Include a pause here and there to give them time to use their imagination and visualise themselves in the story...

There are lots of children's meditation books and CDs available or you can find them free on YouTube.

