



# Let's talk About... Worry: What adults need to know to support children who are feeling worried



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# Glossary

## Worry

- 'Is a thought that upsets you and makes you feel bad inside. A worry can be a specific thought that makes you feel scared...Or it can be more general, like getting a fluttery, sick feeling in your stomach everyday before school, even though you aren't quite sure what is upsetting you' (Huebner, 2002, p. 14).

## Worry Driven Behaviour

- Something that a child or young person does because they are feeling worried. These behaviours are often adopted to stop them experiencing the uncomfortable feeling of worry.

## Worry Moment

- The moment in the day when a child is feeling worried. They are likely experiencing the uncomfortable feelings of worry and may be showing some Worry Driven Behaviour.

## Worry Cycle

- A difficult cycle is created from a child's Worry Driven Behaviour and an adult's reassurances. The reassurances validate the worry without helping to resolve it, meaning the worry is maintained and allowed to dominate.

## Worry Time

- A period of protected time created by an adult to listen to children's worries and LEAD them through the process of resolving them. This happens outside of the Worry Moment.

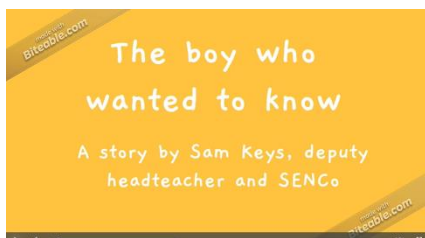


Let's Talk About... Worry:

What adults need to know to support children who are feeling worried

There are two videos that complement this booklet; one developed for children (The boy who wanted to know by Sam Keys) and the other developed for teachers and parents.

Click on the images below to play the videos or copy the links to your browser.



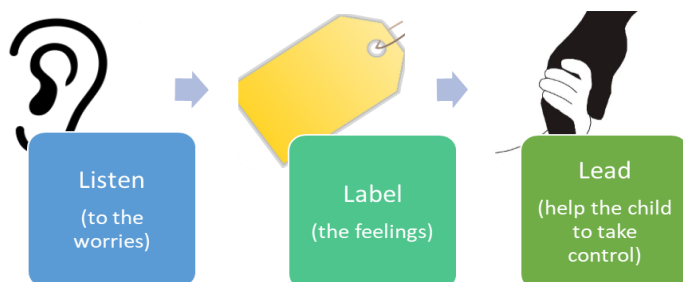
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<https://biteable.com/watch/moving-forward-together-lets-talk-aboutworry-2653778/3512e1defd89e67a54a78b899add7168327495f3>

This booklet aims to help you:

- Understand what worry is and what it can feel like for children.
- LISTEN to both a child's words and behaviour so that you understand when and why they might feel worried.
- LABEL a child's worried behaviour and their feelings to help them understand what they are experiencing and learn that these feelings are transitory and not part of them (the process of externalising).
- LEAD a child from their worries by providing them with strategies for managing their worry which you can practice together. In time this will teach them to calm their uncomfortable feelings and take control on their own.



*Worries can feel too powerful or big for a child to cope with on their own*

# Let's talk about...Worry

Worry happens when thinking about things leaves us feeling scared and unsure. It is normal to worry, and all children will worry sometimes. Worry can even be useful- helping children to stay alert and focused.

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*Having worries can be a really normal part of growing up and is not always a bad thing. Worry can be useful to children at times*

---

However, when worries are frequent and persistent or feel too powerful, they can start to get in the way of real life and stop children having fun.

Newcastle Educational Psychologists have identified a three-step process for helping a child who feels worried: Listen, Label and Lead. These steps can guide your interactions with a child who is worried.

The strategies on these pages need to be revisited frequently and overtly practiced over time. Like with any new skill, you will need to remind the child to use these techniques. Take small steps together until the child is ready to take control.



# Listen

## What do children worry about?

Children's worries can be big or small. Many come from the unknown and can result in leaps of logic or gaps in a child's understanding. Children and teenagers often don't have the perspective that we gain with age. Therefore, something that we think is small may feel life changing to them.



Some young people are unable to explain their worries or, in fact, don't know what they are worried about. The first step to supporting children with worries is to listen to them, so we can help them to find the words to label what they are thinking and feeling.

---

*Make time and space to really listen no matter  
how small or silly a worry might seem*

---

## Common worries for children

Something new  
happening (house,  
group, school)

Going to the  
dentist or doctor

Monsters in  
the dark

Parents separating

Something bad  
happening to others or  
themselves

Homework

A new baby in  
the family

Speaking in front of  
others

Stories on the news

Changing school

Death or  
Bereavement

Not being good at  
sports

Parents and carers  
arguing or family  
conflicts

Not doing well in  
school

Friendships or  
being isolated

Not getting along  
well with teachers



## Listening to a child who is feeling worried

A designated Worry Time is a protected time where you focus on a child's worries. This allows you both to gain control over the worries by putting boundaries around them. It gives you both permission to stop talking and thinking about the worries in the moment, because you know they will be revisited later.

### Worry Time

Make sure this time is protected and interruption free. Applying active listening techniques will help to create and maintain a connection with a child and promote sharing. The Listen, Label and Lead steps provide a useful structure for Worry Time.

### Tips for active listening

- Show you are interested in what they are saying. 'Tell me more about ...', 'Really!' and 'Go on ...'.
- Make lots of eye contact and turn your body towards them when you are listening. Make sure there are no distractions like phones or the TV.
- Check you have understood what they are telling you - repeat back what the child has said.
- Don't try to solve the problem too soon. We know as adults how important it is to tell your story and feel listened to. Once you have listened to a child, they are likely to be more receptive to solutions.



## Worry Driven Behaviour

When a child feels worried, their behaviours may change. Common Worry Driven Behaviours are:

|                                      |                                  |                         |  |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Asking the same questions repeatedly | Staying close to parent or carer | Wanting to stay at home | Avoiding something that they would usually enjoy |
| Becoming angry or impatient          | Repeatedly seeking reassurance   | Becoming teary          | Asking to go to the toilet                       |

Children showing Worry Driven Behaviours are likely experiencing some of the physical feelings of worry... and these can feel uncomfortable. Often, behaviours change to try to stop or displace the uncomfortable feeling.

We can help a child feel better by looking past the Worry Driven Behaviour and helping them to manage the worry directly.

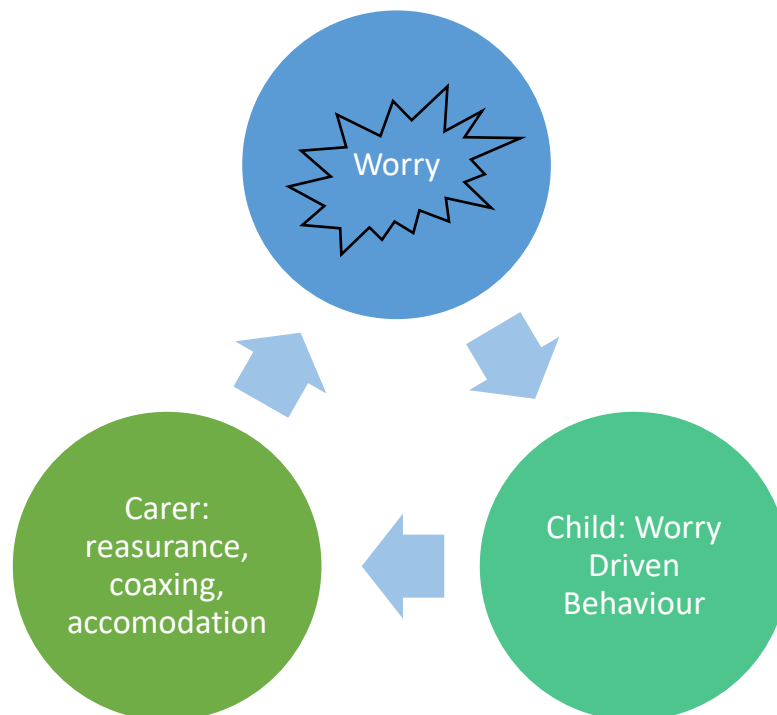




## The Worry Cycle

A worried child can ask the same worry questions or show the same Worry Driven Behaviour repeatedly. As a result, adults can become frustrated, having to respond to the same question or behaviour over and over again. It is common for children and the adults who care for them to get stuck in a cycle of worried behaviour and the resultant coaxing, reassuring and accommodating.

This cycle happens because in talking about, reassuring and answering worry questions we are acknowledging that the worry is real for the child, but we are not helping them to find ways to resolve it.



The best way to break the cycle is to be aware of what is happening and **label it!** Worry Time allows the space needed to talk about worries and start to resolve them, without the emotion of the 'Worry Moment'.

The next two sections, LABEL and LEAD, give ideas for managing the emotional Worry Moment and for helping children to develop strategies to manage their own worries.

# Label

We know that big feelings can feel uncomfortable. When children do not know what they are feeling or why they are feeling that way, they can become scared about what is happening to their body. Helping a child to label their feelings is empowering. It normalises the experience and helps them feel in control.

*NAME it to TAME it!*

*(Siegel, 2012)*

## What does worry feel like?

Children experience worry in different ways. Some children experience the uncomfortable feeling of worry without knowing it is caused by their worries. We can help by teaching children about the body's physical response to worry.

Children describe their worry feelings as:



Flutter and sick in  
their stomach.

Tingly

Tearful

Weak

Headache

Cold

Breathless

Needing the  
toilet

Sweaty

Racing heart

Jelly legs

Difficulty  
sleeping

## Externalise it!

Externalising is the process of thinking about a worry as something outside of ourselves; they are not worried but, instead, feel worried. The process of externalisation changes the worry from a part of them (unchangeable), to a temporary feeling that can be managed and that will pass.

- 
- ☐ I am worried
  - ☒ I feel worried
- 

You can help a young person to externalise a worry by using their imagination. Perhaps their worry is a monster that comes and sits on their shoulder? Or a rat that scurries around their feet? A child will have their own ideas about personifying their worry. Help them to think about what it might look like. Or sound like. Can it be named? Work with children to draw their worry.

Once you have externalised it, you can easily talk about it and to it!

Worry Monster, I know you are trying to make (name) feel uncomfortable now. Go away we are not listening to you!

I know what is going to happen now, I have a plan. So, go away worry!

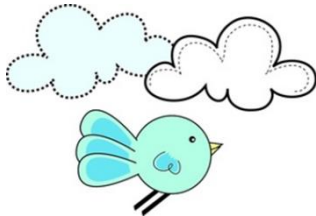
Is that your 'worry' back? – Is it trying to make you feel scared?  
let's tell it to GO AWAY together

# Lead

## Managing a Worry Moment: Calm voice, calm body, calm mind

When a child is feeling worried, they may have an accompanying physical response. For example, their heart might be beating fast, they may be breathing quickly, they might be sweating or feeling like they need the toilet.

We can help children feel calmer and more comfortable without reinforcing their worry. Think about being calm and modelling this to the child. A calm voice and a calm body will help calm the mind.



### Let the emotion clouds roll by

(Siegel, 2012)

- Acknowledge the child's feelings and use a calm voice to tell them you are there for them. Taking deep breaths together or using focused breathing techniques can be helpful. Try slowly sliding a finger of your left hand up and down the outstretched fingers of your right hand, while breathing in through your mouth and out through your nose
- During a hug, try drawing attention to the child's own (fast?) heartbeat. If you are holding the child, notice your slower heartbeat and breathing rate.
- Be accepting of children's feelings, name them and then support them through. Try to acknowledge that the feelings are uncomfortable but reassure the child that they are normal and will pass.
- If you are getting stuck in the Worry Cycle take a moment to label their feelings and behaviour. Acknowledge the worry, then redirect the worry to Worry Time.

*"I think you are feeling worried about going swimming this afternoon, you are asking lots of worried questions. I am going to write down your worry here, look (older children can be encouraged to record their own worries). We can talk about this worry in Worry Time. Now, let's breathe together and tell your worry monster to go away."*

## Using logic to challenge a worry

Working with a child to logically challenge their worries (ideally during Worry Time) should help them feel listened to and teach them to start taking back control. Like the other techniques in this booklet, the following approaches require practice but, if they are used consistently, over time children will learn to manage their worries and emotions independently.

### Accept the worries

- Don't dismiss any worries that are shared, no matter how small or silly they seem
- Rather than saying "Don't be silly there is nothing to worry about" try, "I understand that you are worried about X - lets talk about it."

### Give the facts

- Worries can result from misunderstandings. Ask the child to tell you what they think will happen- what will this look like?
- Tell children the truth (age appropriate) and find out any information you don't know. Use clear factual language.

### Make a plan

- Worries can relate to what will happen. If they centre on something concrete (e.g. staying over at Grandma's) make a plan with the child. This may include details like what time you arrive, choosing what to have for dinner and a time they can call you to say goodnight.





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### Challenge distorted thinking

- Worries can result from distorted perception – I am a rubbish swimmer! No one wants to be my friend! I hate going to Grandma's!
- Don't dismiss these. Acknowledge that they might think this is true, then clearly and logically challenge this. Model this process for the child.
- *"You might think that no one wants to be your friend, but I don't think that is true. I remember when you were at the park, a boy started talking to you on the climbing frame. There are many other times too when people have wanted to be your friend. Let's think of some together."*
- If you cannot immediately think of any ways to challenge their distortions, give yourself some time. Tell them you don't think their view is true and that you are going to think of some examples. Tell them when you can talk about it again.
- Guide children to look again at something that has happened to get more accurate information. Use the words, 'stop', 'pause' and 'rewind' to help them revisit key parts of past events. Encourage children to be 'a detective', challenging them to find examples that counter their perceptions.

### Normalise it!

- Communicate that their feelings and thoughts are normal. Narrate when you are feeling strong emotions or when those around you are. Try to create an environment where emotions are acknowledged and embraced, whilst recognising that it is the behaviours that sometimes accompany these emotions that might have to be challenged.





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# Acknowledgments

Many of the visuals within the booklet have been created by family and friends of the Newcastle Educational Psychology Service. Thanks go to these budding illustrators. Other images are Adobe stock images.

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