Understanding Children's Experiences of Anxiety.

Life Tales

A companion to Sarah's Sleepover

This factsheet is designed to support adults to better understand children's experiences of anxiety, using Sarah's Sleepover as a shared reference point. It is not a diagnostic tool and does not replace professional support.

Instead, it offers insight, reassurance, and practical understanding to help adults respond with calm, connection, and emotional safety.

What This Can Look Like in Children

Anxiety in children doesn't always look like fear or worry.
For many children, anxiety shows up in the body and behaviour before it ever shows up in words. A child may struggle to explain what feels wrong — not because they are avoiding the conversation, but because they genuinely don't yet have the language for what they are experiencing.

Why This Can Feel So Big

Children's brains and nervous systems are still developing. When anxiety rises, children don't yet have the capacity to regulate those feelings on their own. When something feels uncertain or unsafe — even if it looks safe from the outside — a child's body can move quickly into a state of alert. Thoughts may race, sensations intensify, and emotions can spill out as anger, tears, or avoidance.

Why This Often Comes Out as Behaviour

When children don't yet have words for emotional conflict, it often shows up through behaviour.
A child may:

- Shut down rather than choose to talk
- Become angry or defiant
- Withdraw from activities they usually enjoy
- Feel guilty even when they haven't done anything wrong

What Children Need Most

Children don't need to be told they're safe before they feel safe.
They need:

- calm, steady adults
- predictable responses
- reassurance without pressure
- time to settle before talking
- permission to feel without being fixed

Find more resources at
www.ourlifetales.com.au

Children experiencing anxiety may:

- Worry excessively or seem constantly "on edge"
- Avoid new or unfamiliar situations
- Become irritable, angry, or withdrawn
- Complain of stomach aches, headaches, or feeling unwell
- Struggle with sleep, separation, or transitions
- React strongly to situations that seem small to adults

These responses are not attention-seeking or defiance. They are signs of a nervous system that feels overwhelmed.

Helpful responses include:

- Naming that mixed emotions are normal
- Reassuring children they are not Responsible for adult outcomes
- Staying calm when children feel stuck
- Focusing on emotional safety before decisions
- Feeling supported makes it easier for children to think clearly over time.

A Gentle Reminder

- Children are not problems to be solved.
- Anxiety is not a failure, a weakness, or a flaw in a child. It is a signal that something inside them needs care, reassurance, and time.
- With the right support, children can learn that worry doesn't define them — and that they don't have to face it alone.

Some amazing resources to check out!

- Hey Sigmund
- The Kids Mental Health Foundation
- Kids Helpline-School
- Kids Matter- Anxiety
- Ruby's Worry Book 3-5 years

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