

Supporting Young People Through Big Feelings

A guide for carers reading Sarah's Sleepover

Sarah's Sleepover explores how anxiety and worry can affect young people, especially when they are faced with new situations or experiences that feel uncertain.

Sarah wants to go to a sleepover, but as the day gets closer her worries begin to grow. Before long her thoughts start racing, her body feels tense, and she pushes people away, even though she actually needs support.

Many children experience worry like this. They may not understand why their body reacts so strongly, and they often do not have the words to explain what they are feeling.

This story shows how a calm and patient adult can help a child feel safe enough to talk, understand their worries, and find ways to manage overwhelming feelings.

For young people who have experienced trauma or instability, anxiety can appear quickly and feel very intense. Gentle support, patience, and emotional safety help children gradually learn that they can handle these feelings.

Why This Story Matters

Children who experience anxiety often feel embarrassed or ashamed of their worries. They may believe something is wrong with them, especially if their reactions seem bigger than those of other children.

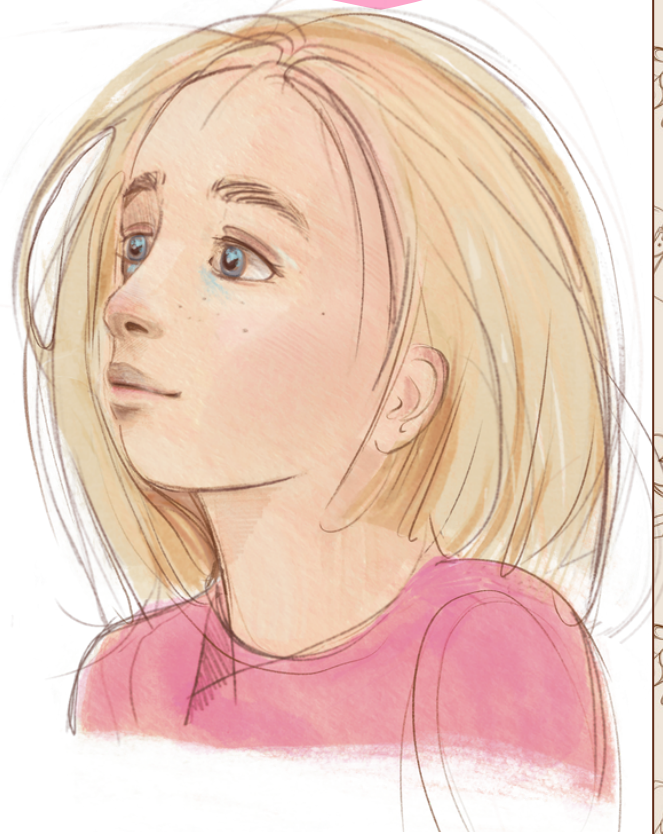
Worry can show up in many ways, including:

- Avoiding new experiences
- Becoming angry or shutting down
- Needing constant reassurance
- Complaining of headaches or stomach aches
- Saying they feel "sick" or want to go home

These reactions are not attention-seeking or manipulative. They are signs that the child's nervous system feels overwhelmed.

When children feel emotionally safe and understood, their bodies gradually learn how to settle again.

Stories like Sarah's Sleepover help children recognise their own feelings and understand that worry does not mean they are a problem.



Reading the Book Together

The goal of reading this book is not to teach a lesson or correct behaviour.

Instead, it is about creating a calm space where a young person can recognise and talk about their feelings.

Helpful ways to read together include:

- Read slowly and allow time for the child to absorb the story
- Notice moments where Sarah's feelings become strong
- Stay calm if the child relates strongly to parts of the story
- Allow the child to share thoughts without interrupting or correcting

Children often talk more freely when discussing a character's feelings rather than their own.

Find more resources at
www.ourlifetales.com.au

Gentle Questions to Ask While Reading

You do not need to ask every question. Use them naturally if the child seems open to talking.

Examples include:

- What do you think Sarah is feeling right now?
- Why do you think her worries started getting bigger?
- What do you think happens in Sarah's body when she feels anxious?
- Why do you think Sarah pushes people away sometimes?
- What helped Sarah start to feel safe again?

These questions help children begin to recognise and name emotional experiences.

Conversation Starters After Reading

If the child seems comfortable, you might explore the story further with gentle prompts.

You could ask:

- Have you ever had worries that felt a bit like Sarah's?
- What kinds of things make worries grow bigger?
- What helps worries feel smaller?
- Who helps you feel safe when you feel overwhelmed?
- What would you say to Sarah if she was your friend?

Not all children will want to talk deeply, and that is okay. Sometimes simply hearing the story is enough.

Helpful Things Carers Can Say

When children feel anxious, reassurance and calm presence are more helpful than logical explanations.

Helpful responses include:

- "It looks like your body is feeling worried."
- "You're safe right now."
- "We can figure this out together."
- "Worries can feel really big sometimes."
- "You are not a problem."

Avoid dismissing the worry by saying things like "There's nothing to worry about." Even when the situation seems small, the child's feelings are real.

Signs a Child May Be Feeling Overwhelmed

Children experiencing anxiety may struggle to explain their feelings.

Instead, it may show up as:

- Anger or frustration
- Refusing to participate in activities
- Clinging to carers
- Difficulty sleeping
- Physical complaints such as stomach aches or headaches

These behaviours are often the child's way of saying, "This feels too big for me." Responding with calm support helps children feel safe enough to share what is happening.

A Gentle Reminder for Carers

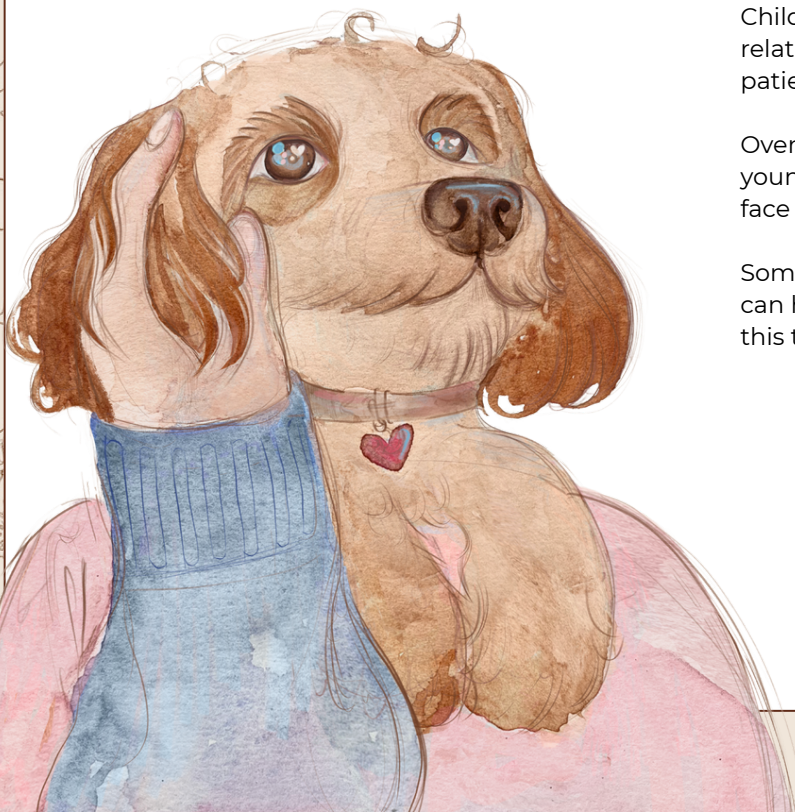
Anxiety does not mean a child is weak, dramatic, or difficult. It means their nervous system is trying to protect them.

Children learn how to manage worry through safe relationships with adults who remain calm, patient, and understanding.

Over time, these supportive experiences help young people build confidence in their ability to face new situations and manage their feelings.

Sometimes the most powerful message a child can hear is: "You are safe, and we will work through this together."

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www.ourlifetales.com.au



Hints & Tips

1. Stay Calm When Worry Shows Up

Children often borrow emotional cues from the adults around them. If you remain calm and steady, it signals to the child that the situation is manageable.

Try saying:

- "I can see this feels really big right now."
- "Let's slow things down together."

2. Help Children Notice What Their Body Is Doing

Anxiety often shows up physically before children recognise the feeling.

You might gently point out:

- Racing heart
- Tight stomach
- Fast breathing
- Restless thoughts

Helping children recognise these signals helps them understand what anxiety feels like.

3. Avoid Dismissing the Worry

Even if the worry seems small to an adult, it may feel enormous to the child.

Instead of saying:

"There's nothing to worry about."

Try:

- "That sounds really worrying for you."
- "Let's talk about it."

Feeling understood helps the brain settle.

4. Break Problems Into Smaller Steps

Large worries can feel impossible for children to solve. Help by focusing on one small step at a time.

For example:

- Packing a comfort item
- Meeting the host family beforehand
- Planning how to call home if needed

Small steps help restore a sense of control.

Teach Simple Calming Strategies

5. Teach Simple Calming Strategies

Children benefit from simple tools they can use when worry grows.

These may include:

- Slow breathing
- Naming five things they can see
- Holding a comfort object
- Taking a quiet break

Practicing these strategies when the child is calm makes them easier to use later.

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6. Reassure the Child They Are Not a Problem

Children with anxiety often worry that their feelings are frustrating for adults.

Clear reassurance helps reduce shame.

You might say:

- "Everyone has worries sometimes."
- "You are not a problem."
- "We will figure this out together."

7. Your Relationship Is the Most Powerful Support

Children do not need perfect words or perfect strategies.

They need consistent adults who listen, stay patient, and help them feel safe.

Over time, these experiences teach children that worries can be managed and that they are not alone.

Some amazing resources to check out!

- Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800)

<https://www.kidshelpline.com.au/>

- Headspace

<https://headspace.org.au/>

- ReachOut Australia

<https://au.reachout.com/>

- Lifeline Australia 13 11 14

<https://www.lifeline.org.au>

- Beyond Blue -1300 22 4636

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

- The Brave Program

<https://brave4you.psy.uq.edu.au/>

- **Qlife** – anonymous and free LGBTI peer support | 1800 184 527

- 13 YARN

<https://www.13yarn.org.au/>

