

ANXIETY

The Covid-19 outbreak has changed life for everyone, and such change can sometimes cause feelings of anxiety. Anxiety is a common feeling, typically caused by a source of unease. Anxiety can affect people in many different ways, impacting upon daily life and often presenting in a range of behaviours in children:

- **Anger** - the changes can trigger a fight / flight response resulting in a child feeling angry
- **Difficulty Sleeping** - settling to sleep and staying asleep can be even more difficult than it might usually be
- **Defiance** - defiance can be an attempt to have some control within a situation that has changed
- **Over-reactivity** - a child may be able to present as being calm however underlying feelings of anxiety may cause over-reactions / negative responses to things, unexpectedly
- **Lack of focus** - anxiety can result in individuals being so preoccupied with their own thoughts on a situation / the change, that they are unable to focus and pay attention to things going on around them
- **Avoidance** - children might go out of their way to avoid certain people, places or activities
- **Over planning** - over planning for situations (where planning is unnecessary or minimal planning would normally be required) can be an attempt to have gain some control, routine and predictability
- **Negativity** - children with anxiety can experience negative thoughts more often than positive ones, which then impacts upon how they express themselves & behave

OT Tip - try interventions to help manage the feelings of anxiety and minimise it's impact on daily life:

- **Relaxation techniques** can help reduce the physical effects of anxiety - try counting, breathing exercises, stretches, yoga, meditation etc
- **Pacing strategies** - anxiety can be exhausting so ensure children pace themselves throughout the day and preserve energy where possible
- **Grading activities** - overcome situations or activities by breaking them down with small, structured steps
- **Physical exercise** is really important for maintaining mental fitness, reducing anxiety, improving focus, and enhancing overall coping and functioning
- **Self-awareness skills** - support children to understand and be aware of their own bodies when their anxiety is rising or affecting them
- **Creative activities** - engage children regularly in preferred activities that are not too challenging but that have therapeutic value e.g. music, art, colouring, writing, drama, pottery etc

PLAY

Play is an essential part of development & daily life for children of all ages, play is their occupation! There are so many benefits of children engaging in play:

- it is through play that children learn
- physical play improves motor skills and motor planning
- pretend play / role play improves communication and interaction skills
- play develops creativity and imagination
- play provides opportunities to problem solve, take turns, share, and follow rules
- play supports the development of emotional regulation and impulse control

OT Tip - Encourage play and develop play skills by:

- Playing 1:1 / joining in when your child is playing
- Using items / toys / games / songs that they are interested in to encourage them to play & to create interaction
- Experimenting with different games & toys to understand what kinds of things your child finds fun and enjoyable
- Following your child's lead, and imitating the way they are playing with items to encourage them to carry on and to reinforce what they are doing
- Modelling how toys can be used in different ways to help your child initiate play / play with new things (if your child struggles with imitation show them what to do and then state "your turn" before hand over hand guiding them through the action / motion with the toy)
- Showing your child videos of other children playing to give them additional ideas of how to play with items
- Playing face to face so that your child can look at you, see what you're doing & communicate with you
- Using praise and positive feedback when your child has played nicely or done something new
- Recognising when your child is getting tired or losing interest, and stopping at this point

- Playing in different places - on the floor, at the table, in the garden etc...playing bare foot outside (if safe to do so) is a great way to strengthen lower limbs, increase sensory feedback & develop body awareness, improve mobility and confidence, and promote freedom & enjoyment of their environment.

Make time for play every day

SENSORY SEEKING

Some learners can crave more sensory input than others, and their constant need to gain ('seek') more sensory input can affect their ability to concentrate, listen, engage in activities, and have appropriate self-control.

Sensory seeking can look like: a constant need to touch objects, surfaces, textures and people around them; being hyperactive & impulsive; putting non-food items in their mouths and frequently wanting to chew things; loving loud noises, having a need to talk loudly or create a lot of noise; being constantly 'on the go' and struggling to sit still; jumping, spinning, climbing, and / or bumping into things; being fascinated / heavily focused on patterns, spinning items, moving items, and / or certain colours & shapes; and frequent smelling / sniffing things.

If you are able to identify the types of sensation your child may be seeking, activity ideas to increase different types of sensory input are listed below:

Visual activities:

- Provide spinning items, flashing toys, torches & mirrors etc
- Try Apps such as 'Sensory Electra' and 'Sensory Magma' for visually stimulating screen play

Auditory (noise) activities:

- Provide opportunity to listen to preferred music / theme tunes / household sounds (provide on a device with headphones if they prefer a louder volume that is too much for other members of the household)
- Be mindful that humming, repeating phrases, and vocalising (including shouting & crying) can be a child seeking sound and therefore creating it themselves, but that it can also be an attempt to control auditory input and block out environmental noise around them that may be too much to process or too loud

Oral activities:

- Use an appropriate oral chew (if available)

- Try crunchy / chewy snacks to provide similar sensory input e.g. carrot sticks, strawberry laces, breadsticks, different cereals

Movement activities:

- Press-ups, wall push-ups, chair push-ups
- Bounce on a gym ball or wobble on a pile of cushions / pillows
- Follow online exercise programmes e.g. The Body Coach or use a Wii Fit <https://www.youtube.com/user/thebodycoach1/search?query=kids>
- Carry out movements and stretches in front of a mirror, for added visual input and improved body awareness in addition to the movement itself
- Use cans of food or toys as weights
- Set up an indoor obstacle course
- Help with cleaning: sweeping, mopping and wiping surfaces are all great forms of proprioceptive input

Tactile Seeking (Touch) activities:

- Play-doh, Arts & Crafts (painting, finger knitting, scrap-booking, tearing paper, making salt dough etc)
- Tactile Adventure Bins (hide toys or jigsaw pieces in porridge, sand, lentils, rice, popcorn etc to retrieve)
- Treasure Hunts (hide small objects in playdoh or adventure bin to find with fingers)
- Shaving Foam & Bubbles (draw in them, blow them & pop with fingers / hands)
- Kitchen Activities (mixing, measuring, tasting, smelling, washing up)
- Extra baths / showers (bubbles, soap, sponges, flannels and brushes)

SAFE SPACES

Providing a contained 'safe' space that offers a retreat when learners are overloaded / distressed / agitated / in need of their own space can be beneficial, and five to ten minutes spent inside such a safe space can really help learners to calm down.

OT Tip - safe spaces can be created by:

- providing a small tent to retreat to
- creating a den by laying a blanket over a small table / across two chairs
- using a large cardboard box to play in
- providing a sleeping bag to lie in / relax in
- providing a quilt or beanbag to play under

Where possible, involve learners in choosing and creating their space, and ensure that it includes pillows / blankets for warmth and comfort. A toy to squeeze, a light up toy, or a favourite cuddly toy could also be included within the safe space

SENSORY OVERLOAD

Sensory overload can occur when there is an increase in sensory input within our environments e.g. lots of lighting, lots of noise (TV, radio, telephone calls, conversations etc), lots of people, lots of household clutter etc. Changes to routine, anxiety, stress and changes in social interactions (seeing more of people than usual, different voices, busier home environments) can all trigger sensory overload too.

Difficulties with sensory overload can impact upon participation and function in daily life, so being aware of the signs and having strategies to support / calm is really important. Sensory overload can present in a variety of ways:

- Loss of balance / co-ordination 
- Stimming e.g. flapping, clapping, blinking, pacing, head banging, spinning objects.. 
- Lashing out 
- Anger / agitation 
- Refusing activities / demand avoidance
- Hysteria / crying 
- Child begins repeating themselves (words / phrases)
- Skin flushes / goes pale 
- Racing heartbeat 

- Sweating
- Stomach ache / nausea / vomiting
- Verbalising “stop” 

Ideas for Calming Sensory Input (children may respond to single strategies or a combination of strategies):

- Reduce noise (use ear defenders, headphones, ear plugs – if tolerated) & light levels (dim lights, use lamps); create a den or safe space (see previous OT tip for ideas on how to do so)
- Speak with soft / quiet voices; try quiet rhythmic music / white noise / nature sounds
- Use an oral chew; blow bubbles; blowing feathers / cotton balls; suck a cold drink through a straw
- Make your own sensory bottle (water, oil, beads, glitter etc)
- Slow rocking or swaying (on a swing, in a rocking chair, over a gym ball or pile of pillows / cushions)
- Sit on or under a bean bag / large pillows; wrap in a duvet (supervise at all times); roll whilst wrapped in a blanket or duvet (supervise at all times)
- Guide the child in active and passive stretches e.g. yoga <https://www.youtube.com/user/CosmicKidsYoga>
- Provide fidget toys or something to squeeze e.g. a ball, cushion / pillow, soft toy, or make your own squishy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9yi-zluTSo>
- Distraction / engagement in a preferred activity, preferably something that usually promotes attention or is repetitive e.g. threading, pressing buttons / switches, colouring etc
- Deep pressure (think pressing, squeezing - promoting body awareness, reassurance and feelings of safety.) e.g. placing / squeezing hands on shoulders; rolling a tennis ball on the back or down the arms; stretching a theraband, a piece of elastic, or a

long sock; encourage self-squeezes (wrap arms around self, hold arms, and squeeze);
wear tighter clothing; wear a backpack around the house for added pressure and
sensory feedback

NB: A note on deep pressure - deep pressure is different to general touch. Light touch (stroking, tickling etc is alerting and can increase arousal, stress and even cause pain, whereas deep pressure provides calming, grounding input, lowering the level of arousal.