

## Childhood Worries and Anxieties

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Dr Mary O’Kane is a Lecturer in Psychology, Early Childhood Studies and Education. Her research interests include childhood transitions; resilience and self esteem and the value of play. She is a regular contributor on Ireland AM, the Alison Curtis Show on Today FM, and Galway Bay FM discussing a broad range of parenting issues. She gives public talks on a range of topics related to child mental health and wellbeing, parenting and education. You can join her quarterly mailing list by emailing her on: [maryok.oakleigh@gmail.com](mailto:maryok.oakleigh@gmail.com) Her first book: Perfectly Imperfect Parenting: Connection Not Perfection was published April 2021. It can be purchased on: [www.drmaryokane.ie](http://www.drmaryokane.ie)

### How can we support children through childhood worries and anxieties?

Children with anxiety, or who worry too much, need our love and support to help them find strategies to cope with their anxiety. You don’t want to belittle a child’s anxiety, but you also don’t want to amplify it. The message is one of support: I know you are anxious, and I will try to help you get through this.

Anxiety is a protection mechanism which helps us survive danger. This is perfectly normal and <i>everyone</i> experiences it from time to time.	Anxiety is like a smoke alarm, but remember the amygdala doesn’t know if the house is burning down, or if it is just burnt toast!	It is helpful for children to have a visual representation of the amygdala (fight or flight), prefrontal cortex (logic) and hippocampus (memory).
There are three parts of anxiety: Thoughts (what we say to ourselves) Physical feelings (how our body responds) and Behaviours (our actions).	When children are in ‘fight or flight’ mode they shift to survival brain. This makes it harder for them to think, make decisions, and express themselves.	Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces anxiety long term. Help them to find their inner brave!
The best way to help children overcome anxiety is to support them to function as well as they can, even when they’re anxious – this results in a long term decrease in anxiety. ‘Laddering’ can help.	Let your child know that you appreciate what it takes to tolerate the anxiety. Don’t force the pace, instead encourage them, you want them to feel a sense of mastery as they accomplish a step.	General Tip: Mindfulness. Practising breathing exercises daily helps children learn how to relax and calm themselves when they are feeling stressed or anxious (Breathing Buddies)
General Tip: Worry Time, a Worry Box, Grounding (5 things) and Glitter Jars can be useful. Also body scan/ muscle relaxation.	General Tip: Free Play is very important. Help children to develop problem solving skills. Try not to jump in and solve problems for them.	General Tip: Don’t be the second chicken! Remember we need to be their calm. You are their ‘one good adult’ and connection is your most important tool.

While it’s normal for children to frequently have fears and worries, some anxious children may need greater support. Please *always* see your GP if you feel your child’s anxiety is a problem that is significantly affecting their daily life and they need further support.

## **Recommended Reading List for Parents**

Perfectly Imperfect Parenting: Connection Not Perfection. Available at: [www.drmaryokane.ie](http://www.drmaryokane.ie)

### **Recommended Reading for Parents:**

#### **No.1 Parent Recommendation: The Opposite of Worry, by Lawrence Cohen**

Dr Malie Coyne, Love in Love out  
The Whole Brain Child, by Dan Siegel  
Cotton Wool Kids by Stella O'Malley  
Roots and Wings, Childhood Needs a Revolution, by Alex Koster

### **Recommended Reading List for Preschool – Senior Infants**

My No.1 Recommendation for kids re: Anxiety: Hey Warrior by Karen Young

The Magic Moment by Niall Breslin  
Mindfully Me Series and Kindfully Me Series (both 3 packs of books) by Louise Shanagher  
Wilma Jean the Worry Machine by Julia Cook  
When My Worries Get Too Big by Kari Dunn Buron  
Silly Limbic by Naomi Harvey  
David and the Worry Beast by Anne Marie Guanci  
Binny the Baboon, Anxiety and Stress Workbook by Dr Karen Treisman

Separation Anxiety:

The Invisible Strong by Patrice Karst  
The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn  
Owl Babies by Martin Waddell  
When I Miss You by Cornelia Maude Spelman

### **Recommended Reading List for Older Children**

What To Do When You Worry Too Much (6-12 years) by Dawn Huebner  
The Coping Skills for Kids Workbook (Primary School Age) by Janine Halloran  
Outsmarting Worry (ages 9-13) by Dawn Heubner  
Roc and Rise (teenagers) by Claire Eaton  
Living Life to the Full, Key Life Skills (teenagers) by Chris Williams  
My Mind Really Matters Journal (Primary School age and Teenage age Journals available)

OCD Type Tendencies: What to do when your brain gets stuck. By Dawn Huebner.