**Anxiety** - some top tips for supporting children to escape the cycle of anxiety:

**1. The goal isn’t to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.**

None of us want to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help children overcome anxiety isn’t to try to remove stressors that trigger it, or pretend that it doesn’t exist. It’s to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they’re anxious. As a by-product of that, the anxiety will decrease or fall away over time.

**2. Don’t avoid things just because they make a child anxious.**

Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset, starts to cry—not to be manipulative, but just because that’s how they feel—and parents take them out of there, or remove the thing they are afraid of, they learn that coping mechanism: the cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

**3. Express positive—but realistic—expectations.**

You can’t promise a child that their fears are unrealistic—that they won’t fail a test, that they’ll have fun ice skating, or that another child won’t laugh at them during show & tell. But you can express confidence that they are going to be okay, they will be able to manage it, and that, as they face their fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives them confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you’re not going to ask them to do something they can’t handle.

**4. Respect their feelings, but don’t empower them.**

It’s important to understand that validation doesn’t always mean agreement. So if a child is terrified about going to the doctor because they are due for an immunisation, you don’t want to belittle their fears, but you also don’t want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic**,** help them understand what they are anxious about, and encourage them to feel that they can face their fears. The message you want to send is, “I know you’re scared, and that’s okay, and I’m here, and I’m going to help you get through this.”

**5. Don’t ask leading questions.**

Encourage your child to talk about their feelings, but try not to ask leading questions— “Are you anxious about your learning? Are you worried about the science experiment?” To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: “How are you feeling about the science experiment?”

**6. Try not to reinforce the child’s fears.**

What you don’t want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: “Maybe this *is* something that you should be afraid of.” For example if a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time they are around a dog, you might be anxious about how they will respond, and you might unintentionally send a message that they *should*, indeed, be worried.

**7. Encourage the child to tolerate their anxiety**.

Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what they want or need to do. It’s really encouraging them to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. It will drop over time as they continue to have contact with the stressor. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that’s how we get over our fears.

**8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.**

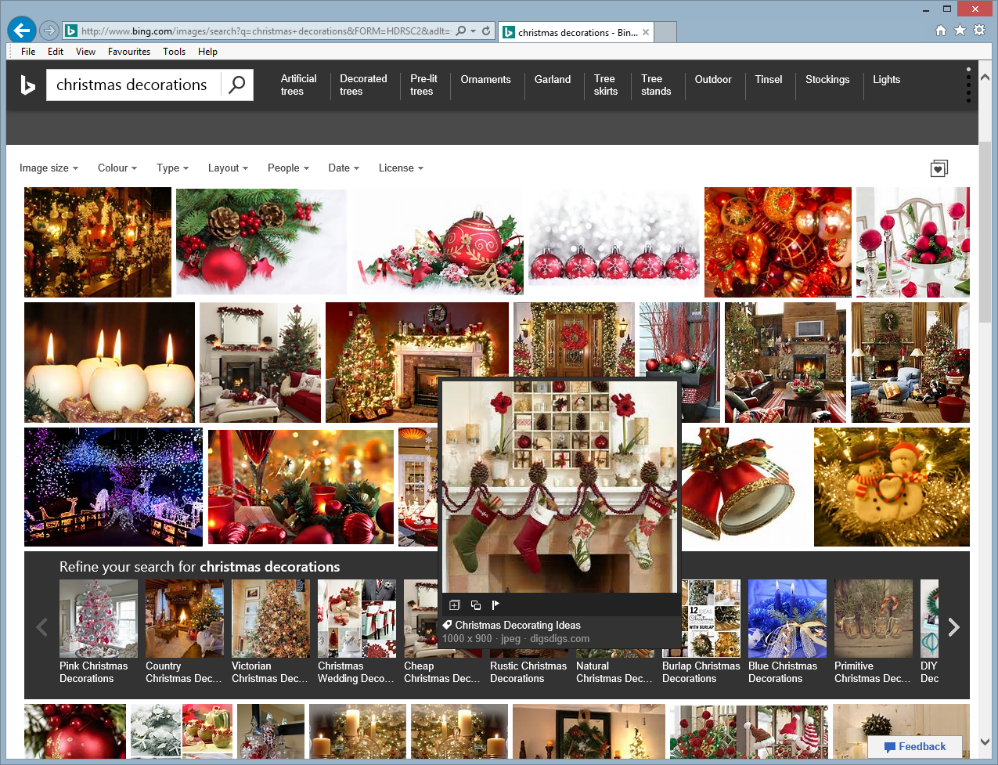
When we’re afraid of something, the hardest time is really *before* we do it. So another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory period. If a child is nervous about going to a doctor’s appointment, you don’t want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go: that’s likely to get your child more keyed up. So just try to shorten that period to a minimum.

**9. Think things through with the child.**

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child’s fear came true—how would she handle it? A child who’s anxious about separating from her parents might worry about what would happen if they didn’t come to pick her up. So we talk about that. “If your Mum doesn’t come at the end of football practice, what would you do?” “Well I would tell the coach my Mum’s not here.” And what do you think the coach would do? “Well he would call my Mum. Or he would wait with me.” A child who’s afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick her up can have a code word from her parents that anyone they sent would know. For some children, having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

**10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.**

There are multiple ways you can help children handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Children are perceptive, let children hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it and feeling good about getting through it.

Whilst the above tips are not exhaustive, notice how your child may be feeling and support them positively if they begin to feel anxious.

Tregonwell Academy – Nigel Bowes Campus