

# LESSON 6 - WORRY BULLIES

**Social and Emotional Competency:** Self-management

## **Learning Intent:**

- Identify physiological signs and symptoms of anxiety
- Understand how the brain responds to fear and anxiety
- Understand how to recognise and overcome thinking traps
- Identify the four steps to fight worry bullies



## **Lesson Six**

Fear, worry and anxiety are all normal feelings and all children experience fears at particular stages in their development. They are part of our evolution as a species to help us survive, emerge and develop at specific times in our lives. For example, you may remember your child experiencing separation anxiety as a baby at around 6-9 months of age. You may remember your child during their toddler and preschool years fearing the dark, animals or fearing supernatural things such as monsters or ghosts. These are common fears for young children.

But for some children, they experience worries and fears to a much greater degree and/or continue to experience fears long after other children of a similar age and stage of development have outgrown them. It's the intensity and extensiveness of the fear that becomes the issue. For example the fear of germs can be seen as a normal fear, who wants to eat out of a dog's bowl? But it's the intensity of the fear that causes people to feel overwhelmed and it becomes a problem when it starts to interfere with their daily life. I.e. excessive washing of hands or avoiding certain activities or places because of the fear. A little worry is normal, however too much worry and not knowing how to deal with it can affect our everyday functioning.

Lesson six begins by teaching students what happens to our brain when we experience anxiety and fear. Learning about the brain teaches children how to better understand why we feel, think and act the way we do when we experience anxiety. Students will learn to recognize the physiological signs and symptoms of anxiety as well as recognize unhelpful patterns of thoughts (thinking traps) that often lead to feelings of fear and anxiety. It is common for children and adults alike to fall into these traps every now and then for brief periods of time. Some children fall into these traps more frequently and find it difficult to change their thinking pattern. It is important to teach children to recognise these traps in order to overcome them. Children will also learn how to tackle their worries by following 4 simple steps. They will learn that worried thoughts can be changed to calm thoughts by using realistic thinking.

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## Thinking Traps

### Catastrophizing

Catastrophization is when we focus on the worst possible outcome or make a mountain out of a molehill by making a small problem become a major catastrophe. Sometimes anxious thinking can become catastrophic. Children may imagine the worst-case scenario and overestimate the likelihood that something bad will happen and the consequences if it did happen. By challenging the catastrophic thought and realising that what they are imagining is not very likely, children often feel less anxious. We can challenge these catastrophic thoughts with the 'How Big is My Problem' scale which challenges these catastrophic thoughts.

### Mind-reading/Jumping to Conclusions

We jump to conclusions when we predict what is going to happen, with little or with no evidence. For example: My teacher is going to be so mad at me tomorrow because I forgot my library books. Jumping to Conclusions can also involve thinking that you know what others are thinking, we call this mind-reading. Often we assume that they are thinking the worst of us.

### Overgeneralising

This occurs when we use the words 'always' or 'never' to describe situations. For example, I always make mistakes. This is a problematic way of thinking and will often stop us from risk taking and persevering.

### Exaggerate/Worst-case scenario

Worst-case scenario is when we exaggerate how badly something will be and how difficult it will be to cope.

## Strategies to Support Your Anxious Child

### 1. Encourage Brave

Children tend to avoid situations they find worrying. Allowing children to avoid situations they are afraid of may make them feel better in the short term, but in the long term it increases their anxiety and stops them from learning to manage their fears and sends the message that there really is something to be afraid of. If a child in an uncomfortable situation becomes upset and her parents whisk her out of there, or remove the thing she's afraid of, she's learned avoidance as a coping mechanism, and that cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

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## 2. Respect feelings, but don't empower them.

Acknowledge your child's fear without dismissing or ignoring them. It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. For example, if your child is terrified about going to the doctor because he's due for a needle, you don't want to dismiss his fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. By listening empathetically and by acknowledging his fears you can help him understand what he's anxious about, and encourage him to feel empowered to face his 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."

## 3.. Ask Open-ended Questions.

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

## 4. Don't reinforce the child's fears.

Your tone of voice and body language could send unintentional messages that there is something to be afraid of. For example, your child may have had a negative experience with a dog. The next time she is around a dog you may feel concerned about how she will respond and unintentionally send a message that she should, indeed, be worried.