

ADHD, Anxiety and the Worry Behind the Behaviour

A detailed parent guide to recognising anxiety when it looks like anger, avoidance, perfectionism, repeated questions, control, physical symptoms or 'defiance'.

Anxiety does not always look frightened. A child may become argumentative before school, demand that plans stay exactly the same, ask the same question twenty times, refuse to begin work they fear getting wrong, become angry when corrected, avoid parties, complain of stomach aches or appear controlling when they are actually trying to make an uncertain situation feel safer.

ADHD can add another layer. Forgetting instructions, losing belongings, impulsive mistakes, difficulty judging time, rejection experiences and repeated criticism can all create situations a child learns to anticipate with worry. Anxiety can then make attention, working memory and emotional regulation even harder. The result can be a cycle in which the child's attempts to feel safe are mistaken for deliberate difficult behaviour.

What might the worry look like?

What adults may see	Possible worry underneath	A more useful first question
Refusal or avoidance	'What if I cannot do it?' 'What if something goes wrong?'	What feels hardest about starting or going?
Anger when corrected	Embarrassment, fear of failure or a history of feeling 'always wrong'.	Did the correction feel bigger than the mistake?
Repeated reassurance seeking	The answer reduces anxiety briefly, but uncertainty quickly returns.	What does the child fear would happen if the answer were not certain?
Perfectionism	Mistakes may feel unsafe, exposing or proof of not being good enough.	Can we make the task safe enough to be imperfect?
Trying to control plans	Predictability may be being used to manage uncertainty.	What part of the change feels unknown or unsafe?

Anxiety can borrow the language of behaviour

When a child says 'I don't care', 'I'm not doing it' or 'you can't make me', listen to the words but also notice timing. Does the behaviour appear before tests, unfamiliar places, social events, transitions, separation, homework or situations where the child might be judged? Behaviour is not proof of anxiety, but patterns can tell us where to look.

Physical symptoms are real symptoms

Anxiety can be accompanied by nausea, stomach pain, headaches, racing heart, sweating, shaking, dizziness, needing the toilet or feeling unable to breathe comfortably. These experiences should not be dismissed as 'just anxiety', and persistent or concerning physical symptoms need appropriate medical assessment.

Common worry patterns in children with ADHD

The aim is not to interpret every difficult moment as anxiety. It is to recognise patterns that can otherwise be missed, particularly when a child expresses distress through irritability, avoidance or attempts to control the environment.

Fear of mistakes	A child who has experienced frequent correction may become highly alert to getting things wrong. They may avoid beginning, erase repeatedly, hide work or become angry when help is offered.
Rejection and belonging	Friendship difficulties, impulsive comments or previous exclusion can lead to intense worry about whether others are annoyed, laughing, leaving or judging.
Uncertainty and change	Not knowing exactly what will happen can increase mental load. Transitions, substitute teachers, timetable changes, travel and unfamiliar events may trigger repeated questions.
Performance and school	Tests, reading aloud, PE, homework, remembering equipment or keeping up with written work can become sources of anticipatory anxiety.

Reassurance: helpful in the moment, complicated when it becomes a loop

Reassurance can be loving and appropriate, especially when a child is distressed. But when the same certainty has to be supplied repeatedly, anxiety may be learning that it can only settle when another person removes every doubt. Instead of endlessly answering the same question, acknowledge the worry, remind the child of what is known, and help them tolerate a small amount of uncertainty at a manageable pace.

Perfectionism can stop a child starting

A child may procrastinate because the task feels boring or difficult, but sometimes the barrier is fear of producing something imperfect. Reduce the entry point: rough draft, one question, five minutes, 'good enough' version. Praise flexibility, recovery and willingness to try rather than only the finished result.

Masking and the child who appears fine

Some children contain worry in public and release it at home. They may be quiet, compliant or high-achieving at school while using enormous effort to monitor themselves. Home can then receive irritability, tears, shutdown or explosive distress. Different behaviour across settings does not automatically mean the problem exists only at home.

Sleep and nighttime worry

When external demands stop, worries can become louder. A brief earlier-evening check-in or 'worry parking' page can help prevent bedtime becoming the only place problems are discussed. Persistent sleep difficulties need a wider look, including sleep patterns, physical factors, medication and other mental-health concerns.

Anxiety, ADHD and avoidance can form a cycle

Avoidance reduces distress immediately, which can make avoiding feel necessary next time. But pushing too hard can overwhelm the child and damage trust. Support usually involves finding a step that is challenging enough to build confidence but small enough to remain achievable, with professional guidance where anxiety is significant.

Supporting anxiety without feeding shame

Children need help to understand that anxiety is something their mind and body are doing, not evidence that they are weak or difficult. At the same time, support should gradually increase their confidence in coping rather than requiring the world to become perfectly certain.

Name what you notice	'Your body looks worried' or 'I notice this gets harder when you don't know what will happen.' Avoid telling the child what they feel if they disagree.
Separate feeling from danger	Validate that the fear feels real while gently distinguishing a worried prediction from evidence that something unsafe is happening.
Make the next step smaller	Reduce a large demand to the first manageable action. Anxiety often becomes louder when the whole task is held in mind at once.
Prepare, but do not rehearse forever	Useful preparation can reduce uncertainty. Repeatedly revisiting every possible outcome can become part of the anxiety loop.
Build recovery evidence	Afterwards, notice what the child managed: 'You were worried and you still walked in.' This builds a story of coping, not a story of never feeling anxious.

When anger is carrying fear

If anxiety arrives as anger, deal with safety and regulation before trying to uncover the fear. Once calm, you might ask, 'Was there a moment when this started to feel unsafe, embarrassing or impossible?' Do not insist there must be anxiety underneath every angry reaction. The child's answer and the wider pattern matter.

Working with school

Ask about the situations surrounding distress: transitions, tests, reading aloud, unstructured times, group work, PE, homework, friendship difficulties and changes to routine. Helpful adjustments may include clearer preparation, written instructions, a trusted adult, a predictable arrival, reduced public correction or support to break tasks down. Adjustments should increase access, not simply hide an unmet need.

Parents can become part of the worry system without meaning to

When a child is distressed, adults naturally try to prevent the next difficult moment. Families can gradually begin checking, reminding, speaking for the child or avoiding situations before the child asks. This comes from care. If anxiety is expanding, professional support can help families decide where accommodation is protective and where gradual confidence-building is needed.

What Is the Worry Behind the Behaviour? - Parent Map

Use this after the difficult moment, not as an interrogation during distress. Look for repeated patterns across situations.

What behaviour are we seeing?	_____
What happened immediately before it?	_____
What might my child be predicting will happen?	_____
Is there fear of mistakes, embarrassment or being judged?	_____
Is uncertainty or a change involved?	_____
Is there a friendship or rejection worry?	_____
Could sensory overload or exhaustion be contributing?	_____
What does the child notice in their body?	_____
What reassurance are they repeatedly seeking?	_____
What are we currently helping them avoid?	_____
What is one smaller, manageable next step?	_____
What helps them feel supported without needing perfect certainty?	_____
What does school see?	_____
What needs medical or mental-health assessment?	_____

When to seek additional support

Seek appropriate professional help when anxiety is persistent, worsening or substantially affecting school attendance, sleep, eating, friendships, family life or the child's ability to do ordinary activities. Also seek support for panic symptoms, significant low mood, self-harm concerns, severe distress or physical symptoms requiring assessment. Immediate risk to the child or others requires urgent help through appropriate services.

A message for parents

It can be exhausting when every ordinary request seems to uncover another worry. Parents may find themselves answering the same questions, predicting every possible trigger and trying to keep life calm enough for the child to cope. Understanding anxiety does not mean allowing fear to make every family decision. It means recognising the fear accurately, reducing shame, providing the right support and helping the child discover - gradually and safely - that they can experience uncertainty and still cope.

Further information

Useful starting points include NHS information about anxiety in children and ADHD, NICE guidance relevant to ADHD and anxiety, and appropriate support through the child's GP, school/SENCO or mental-health services where indicated. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

Standalone ADHD Parent Resource