



# When Quiet Isn't Calm

A Parent's Guide to Spotting and Supporting Hidden Anxiety in Children



Every purchase helps fund coaching for anxious children through Tiny Tools CIC.

# 10 Signs It Might Be Anxiety — Not Calm

Sometimes the child who seems the easiest... is carrying the heaviest emotional load. These signs often go unnoticed because they don't disrupt the classroom or trigger alarms — but they can be just as serious.



## 1. Tummy aches, headaches, or feeling sick — with no clear illness

Children don't always have the words to say, "I feel overwhelmed." Instead, anxiety shows up physically. That "random" bellyache before school? The headache before a party? It's their nervous system going into overdrive — their body trying to keep them safe from something it perceives as threatening.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Always rule out illness first — but if it's a pattern, dig deeper.

## 2. Over-apologising or being overly cautious

You hear "sorry" constantly — for things that don't need an apology. They check in repeatedly: "Did I do that right?" This isn't just being polite — it's self-protection. They're scanning for approval, fearing rejection, and trying to stay "good enough" to avoid criticism or conflict.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Swap "It's okay" with "You don't need to be perfect to be loved."

## ▢ 3. Perfectionism

Mistakes aren't just frustrating — they're terrifying. Whether it's schoolwork, art, or getting dressed, everything has to be "just right." You may notice tears, refusals, or even meltdowns over the smallest imperfections. This isn't about being ambitious — it's about feeling safe through control.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Praise effort, not outcome. Let them see you mess up (and survive it!).

## ▢ 4. Avoiding school, activities, or social events

They might seem "lazy" or "clingy" — but often they're afraid. Fear of separation, fear of not fitting in, sensory overwhelm, or worries about being judged can all lead to quiet avoidance. You'll hear, "I don't want to go," or "My tummy hurts," just before key events.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Validate first, then explore together. "I hear you're scared. Want to tell me why?"



## ▢ 5. Shutdowns or meltdowns — only at home

They hold it together all day. Then the minute they're through the door, they explode or retreat. This isn't manipulation — it's release. Home is safe enough to stop masking, and all that bottled-up stress pours out.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** See home meltdowns as trust — they're showing you the truth of how hard they've been holding it in.

## ▢ 6. Night waking or trouble falling asleep

At bedtime, there are fewer distractions — which means worries take centre stage. “What if” questions spiral. They might ask to stay with you, struggle to fall asleep, or wake up multiple times. Sometimes, sleep feels scary because it means letting go of control.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Use calming routines, but also give them safe space to talk before bed.

## ▢ 7. Hyper-awareness of rules or routines

They'll correct you if something's “not right.” They need to know what's happening next. Unexpected change causes tears or panic. This need for control can be their way of staying safe in a world that feels unpredictable.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Use visual schedules or countdowns. And when plans change, give them a calm, honest heads-up.

## ▢ 8. People-pleasing or needing constant praise

They light up with approval — and crumble without it. They go out of their way to keep everyone happy, often at their own expense. They're not just kind — they're desperate to be liked, because approval equals safety.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Let them know they are loved and accepted even when they say no or make mistakes.





## □ 9. Fidgeting, chewing, nail biting, or skin picking

These repetitive actions aren't always "bad habits." They're unconscious ways of self-soothing. Fidgeting helps manage energy. Chewing can calm the nervous system. Biting or picking often gives them a sense of control in the face of rising panic.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Offer fidget tools or chewy necklaces. Reframe these actions as communication.

## □ 10. Always "fine" — but never truly relaxed

They never complain. They're "no trouble." But they also never seem joyful or carefree. Their body is often tense. They may appear serious beyond their years. Because they're working so hard to be "good"... they don't know how to simply be.

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Invite play without pressure. Show them what relaxed looks like. Let them be silly and safe.

# A Day in the Life of a Quietly Anxious Child

The outside doesn't always match the inside...

## What You See

## What They Feel

### **Morning:**

He gets dressed without fuss, but insists on wearing the same jumper again — even though it's in the wash.

**"If I wear something different, what if people laugh? What if it feels weird? I don't like not knowing how it'll feel."**

### **School drop-off:**

He walks in quietly. Doesn't cry. No drama.

**"My tummy hurts. What if today's different? What if the teacher is off? What if I get something wrong and everyone sees?"**

### **During class:**

He follows all the rules. Stays in his seat. Doesn't interrupt.

**"If I don't get picked, it's okay. Just don't notice me. Don't ask me something I'll mess up."**

### **Break time:**

He stands near the wall or plays alone. Teachers say, "He's just shy."

**"Everyone already has friends. What if I say something weird? It's easier to stay out of the way."**

### **Pick-up time:**

He walks out quietly. Smiles when you ask how his day was. Says "fine."

**"Don't cry now. Don't cry now. Don't let it show. I'm nearly home."**

### **Evening:**

He refuses to do homework. Bursts into tears when his sibling teases him.

**"I've held it in all day. I'm tired. Everything feels too much now. Why does no one get it?"**

### **Bedtime:**

He stalls. Doesn't want to go to sleep. Keeps coming downstairs.

**"What if something bad happens while I'm asleep? What if tomorrow's even harder? Can you stay with me?"**

# Tiny Tools Reflection:

This is why we STOP and LISTEN — not just to the behaviour, but to what might be beneath it. When we tune in instead of brushing off, we give our children the one thing their anxiety can't override: Safety.

## 1. STOP: Don't Jump to Fix — Sit With First

When they're anxious, resist the urge to say:

- "You're fine."
- "There's nothing to worry about."
- "Stop being silly."

Instead, stop and breathe with them.

### Try this:

- "Let's take 3 breaths together. I'm here with you."
- "I can see you're feeling something. Want to show me where in your body it feels big?"

This calms their nervous system and yours. You're showing them you're not scared of their big feelings — and that helps them feel safe.



## 2. TUNE IN: Look Beneath the Behaviour

Every behaviour is communication. Even silence.

When your child is:

- Refusing to go to school
- Melting down at bedtime
- Clinging to routines

Ask yourself:

- What might this behaviour be trying to protect them from?

### Try this:

- Keep a short “behaviour diary” for 3 days.

Note what happened before the upset — and what happened after. Patterns often appear when you’re tuning in.

## 3. LISTEN: Validate, Then Support

Validation isn’t agreement. It’s saying:

- “I hear you.”
- “You’re allowed to feel that.”
- “This is hard.”

When kids feel heard, their anxiety often softens. They stop fighting to be understood, and start trusting they’re safe.

### Try this:

- Don’t: “It’s not a big deal.”
- Do: “That sounds scary. Want to talk about it or just sit together for a bit?”

## 4. INVESTIGATE: Label the Feeling (Gently)

Labelling emotions helps children process them.

Many anxious children struggle to name their feelings. When we help, we reduce the overwhelm.

### Try this:

- “Is it more like nervous, or more like scared?”
- “Where do you feel it — head, chest, tummy?”
- “What colour do you think it is today?”

This turns the invisible into something manageable.



## 5. THINK AGAIN: Reframe Fears Together

Once the panic passes, help them challenge the anxious thoughts — not in the moment, but when calm.

### Try this:

- “What’s the worry?”
- “What would you say to a friend who felt that?”
- “What’s something we can do if that happens?”

This teaches flexibility — not just false reassurance.

## 6. LEAD WITH LOVE: Create a ‘Safe to Feel’ Home

Your child is not broken. They're sensitive. Wired differently. Processing more.

A “safe to feel” home means:

- Emotions are allowed
- Mistakes aren’t punished
- Questions are welcome
- Love is unconditional

### Try this:

Start a “feelings check-in” at dinner or bedtime:

- “What colour was your day?”
- “Was there a time you felt brave?”
- “Did your body feel calm or tight today?”



## 7. Co-Regulation Tools (Use Daily!)

These tools train the nervous system to feel safe and connected over time:

Tool	How to Use	When
Belly Breathing	Hand on tummy, slow 4-in/4-out breath	Start of school day, before bed
Body Scan	"Can you feel your toes? Your knees? Shoulders?"	When anxious or wired
Art/Play Expression	Drawing feelings, play-doh squeezing, scribbling storms	When they can't find the words
Calming Box	Box with sensory toys, calming smells, visual prompts	Build one together for "wobbly" times
Transition Countdown	"3 more minutes... 2 more..." visual or verbal countdown	Before switching tasks or leaving places

### Tiny Tools Reflection:

**When you feel helpless — start small. Your calm presence is more powerful than you think. You don't need to "fix" anxiety. You need to help your child feel safe enough to face it.**

# Self-Check for Parents

You're not failing. You're learning. And you don't have to do it perfectly to do it powerfully.

Anxious children often have anxious parents. Not because you're doing something wrong — but because you feel everything deeply, just like they do. Your nervous systems are in a dance.

This page is about pressing pause.....not to blame yourself — but to understand your own lens.



## Ask Yourself:

### 1. What messages did I grow up with around emotions?

- Were big feelings allowed, or shut down?
- Were you told to “calm down” instead of being helped through it?

Your blueprint isn't your fault — but it can be updated.

---

### 2. How do I respond when my child avoids something?

- Do I panic and push?
- Do I say “just get on with it”?
- Or do I shut down too?

Awareness is power. Start noticing your go-to reactions — they're rooted in your own story.

---

### 3. Am I holding unrealistic expectations of what they “should” be able to handle?

- Would I expect the same from another child with a visible disability?
- Is my frustration about their behaviour — or about feeling helpless?

Let go of the “should.” Work with the child in front of you, not the version you imagined.

---

### 4. Do I give myself permission to pause?

- Or do I feel guilty when I rest?
- Do I let myself feel messy, sad, or uncertain — or only show strength?

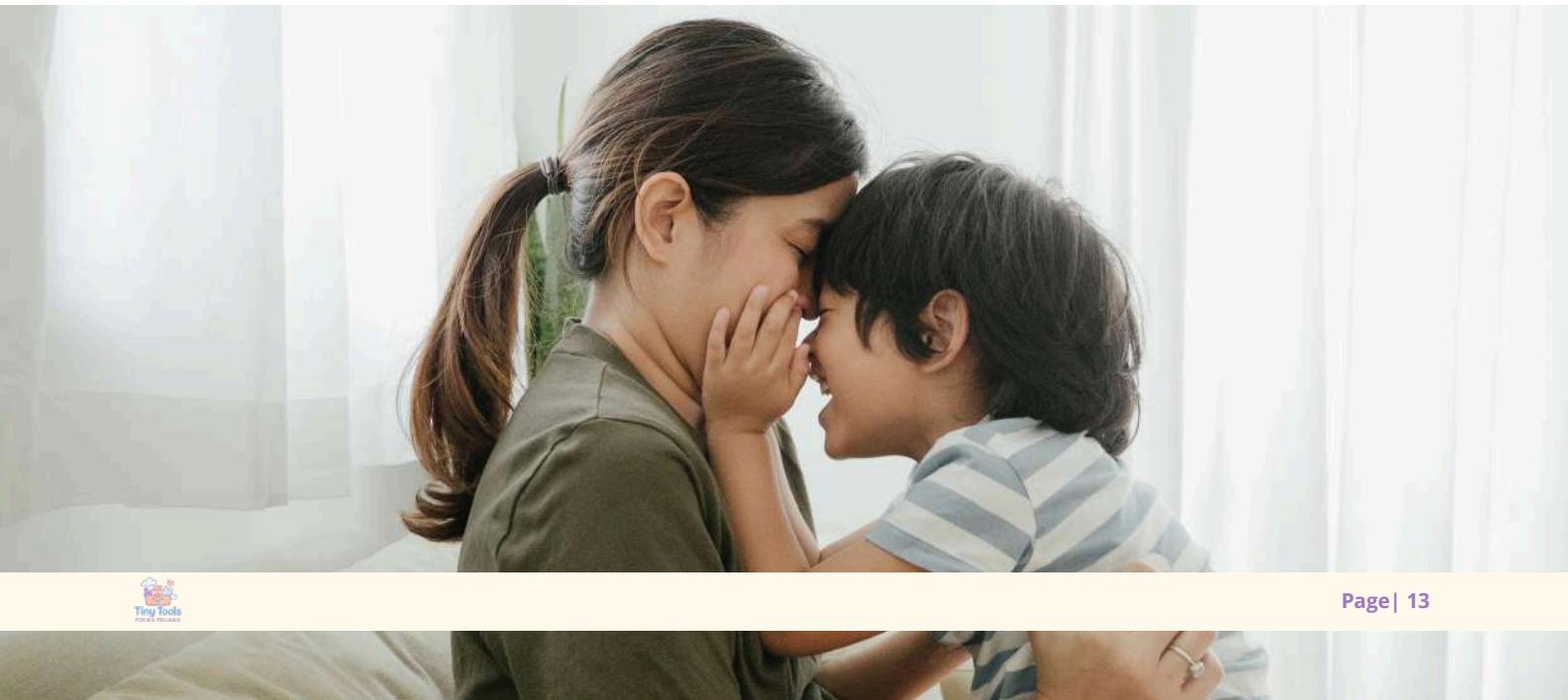
Your child is watching how you treat yourself.

*Self-kindness is emotional modelling.*

---

#### Tiny Tools Tip:

**You’re not too late. You’re right on time.**  
Even just reading this guide is proof that you’re already doing the work.



## What You Can Say to Yourself Instead:

Old Thought	New STILL-Aligned Reframe
"I'm not doing enough."	"I'm learning, and that's enough for today."
"I've messed them up."	"I'm showing up differently now. That matters more."
"I don't know what I'm doing."	"I don't have to know everything to be what they need."
"Other parents don't struggle like this."	"This is my story — and I'm growing in it."



# Bonus Page 1: Calm-Down Plan (Printable Tool)

A simple, repeatable 5-step regulation plan parents and children can use together — especially during overwhelm or shutdown.



## My Calm-Down Plan

Use this when your child feels anxious, overwhelmed, or shut down. Keep it somewhere visible — fridge, bedroom wall, calm box.

## Stop and Name the Feeling

- “What’s going on in your body right now?”
- “Can we name this feeling?”

*My words for it:* \_\_\_\_\_

## Pick a Calm-Down Tool

(Choose one — or build a toolkit together)

- 3 deep belly breaths
- Fidget / squeeze toy
- Safe space / comfort corner
- Scribble out the feeling
- Hug / weighted blanket
- Calm-down jar
- Music / headphones
- Cold water splash

*My favourite tools:* \_\_\_\_\_

## Talk or Draw It Out

- “Can you draw what the feeling looks like?”
- “Do you want to tell me or show me?”

## Think Again (Once Calm)

- “What was your worry?”
- “What could we try next time?”
- “What do we want to remember if this happens again?”

*Helpful thoughts:* \_\_\_\_\_

## End with Reconnection

- Hug, quiet time, play, or laughter
- Help them know: “You’re safe. I’m here. We got through it.”



## Bonus Page 2: Let's Build Your Tiny Tools Box



Creating a toolkit together helps your child feel prepared and supported when emotions get big. Build it before the meltdown — so it's already familiar when they need it most.

**We split the Tiny Tools into 3 categories to support your child in a calm, clear way:**

- ➡ Things to Put in the Box – Physical, sensory items your child can touch, hold, or use during anxious moments.
- ➡ Things to Practise as Routines – Skills you practise together regularly, like breathing and body scans.
- ➡ Words and Reminders to Stick Up – Calming words or affirmations to display around the home or in their toolkit.

*Each type of tool helps your child feel safe in a different way — through the body, the brain, and the environment.*

### Things to Put in the Box

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Toolkit Item	Notes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Chew toy / stress ball	For car journeys and school bags
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Feelings cards	Keep near bedtime or in a calm corner
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	“Safe person” photo	For comfort during separation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Calm playlist	Save to a device or speaker
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Visual routine cards	Morning or after-school transitions

## Things to Practise as Routines

- Belly breathing (hand on tummy, slow 4 counts)
- Body scans ("Can you feel your toes? Shoulders?")
- Drawing or journaling big feelings
- 5-4-3-2-1 grounding (5 things you see...)
- Regular "check-in" questions at dinner or bedtime

## Words and Reminders to Stick Up

- You're safe now."
- "It's okay to feel everything."
- "We figure it out together."
- "You're not in trouble — you're supported."

**Tiny Tools Tip:** Tools only work when they're practised. Use them on calm days too — not just crisis moments.

*Let your child help decorate or name their box. The more ownership they feel, the more likely they'll use it when it counts.*



# Bonus Page 3: 10 Phrases to Say Instead of “Calm Down”

Because words matter — especially  
when emotions are high.



Instead of...

Try Saying...

“Calm down!”	“I can see this feels big. I’m here.”
“You’re fine.”	“It makes sense that feels scary.”
“Stop crying.”	“Let it out. I’m not going anywhere.”
“Why are you acting like this?”	“Something feels too much. Let’s figure it out together.”
“Just breathe.”	“Let’s breathe together. Ready?”
“Be good.”	“Be kind to yourself, even when it’s hard.”
“Don’t be silly.”	“You’re safe to feel what you’re feeling.”
“Nothing bad is going to happen.”	“What’s one small thing we can do if that worry comes true?”
“It’s not a big deal.”	“It feels big to you — and that matters.”
“Get over it.”	“We’ll move through this together.”

# Want More Tools?

You've taken the first — and most important — step.

You've stopped.

You've listened.

You've tuned in.

And your child will feel the difference.

**But if you're still feeling overwhelmed, second-guessing yourself, or wondering, "What do I do next?" — you're not alone.**

*That's exactly why *Tiny Tools for Big Feelings* exists.*

## Here's how I can support you next:

### 1:1 Parent Coaching

We'll work together to:

- Understand your child's anxiety and behaviours
- Learn practical tools based on the STILL Method
- Build a calm, connected home environment that works for your family



**Available online or in person (Wirral/Liverpool area)**



**carly@tinytoolsforbigfeelings.co.uk**

# Small Group Sessions (COMING SOON)

Join a safe, non-judgemental space with other parents who get it.  
We'll walk through common challenges, tools, and mindset shifts — together.



Be the first to know when bookings open:

[tinytoolsforbigfeelings.co.uk](http://tinytoolsforbigfeelings.co.uk)

## Tiny Tools Books + Guides

If this guide helped you — there's more on the way.

***Coming soon:***

**“Tiny Tools for Big Guilt: Letting Go of Perfect Parenting”**

*A workbook for parents learning to quiet the guilt and trust themselves again.*

## Why I Do This

I'm not just a coach. I'm a mum. I've been the parent googling symptoms at midnight, feeling helpless in a school meeting, or crying on the bathroom floor because I couldn't "fix it."

Tiny Tools CIC exists to:

- Make emotional tools accessible
- Offer coaching to families regardless of income
- Give quiet, anxious, neurodivergent children a voice — and a plan

*Every purchase helps fund 1:1 coaching and workshops for children and parents who need it most.*



## Let's Stay Connected



[carly@tinytoolsforbigfeelings.co.uk](mailto:carly@tinytoolsforbigfeelings.co.uk)



[tinytoolsforbigfeelings.co.uk](http://tinytoolsforbigfeelings.co.uk)



[@tinytoolsforbigfeelings](https://twitter.com/tinytoolsforbigfeelings)



[@tiny\\_tools\\_for\\_big\\_feelings](https://www.instagram.com/tiny_tools_for_big_feelings)



[Tiny Tools for Big Feelings](https://www.facebook.com/TinyToolsForBigFeelings)