



## Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Michael Grose

# How to move your child from worrier to warrior

As a parent of a worrier, and also a natural born worrier myself, I'm a collector of ideas and strategies to better manage anxieties and worries. Fortunately, as a child my young worrier didn't allow her anxieties to prevent her from participating in sporting, learning, social or leisure activities inside or outside school.

She did, however, spend a lot of time worrying about how little everyday things would pan out, almost to the point of being sick at times. She was a micro-manager who always made sure she had every angle covered in an unfamiliar or new situation. For instance, if she was to be picked up from a friend's birthday party she'd always have a back-up plan in case a parent wouldn't arrive in time to take her home! 'Being prepared for every contingency' was one of her main strategies to help alleviate her worries.

Many children worry about seemingly little things that they have no control over. Whether it's worrying about the house catching on fire; monsters or spiders lurking under their beds; or even worrying that their parents will go to work in the

morning and won't return home can seem irrational to all-knowing adults but make perfect sense to them.

If you are a Type A worrier yourself then you probably fully comprehend your child's anxieties and worries. You know that being told not to overthink things or to stop worrying just won't cut it. If you are the 'It'll be right. Don't overthink it' type then you may be scratching your head wondering what all the fuss is about. There's no doubt that worriers need careful, sensitive handling by families and teachers alike. Your concern and understanding is one thing but they also need some practical tools and ideas to help them cope now and build strength so they can minimise the impact of worries in the future.

Here's a collection of great ideas that may help you transition a young worrier to being a social and learning warrior, or at least get the worry bug under control.

From writers such as Jeanene Ecob author of *Everyday Jitters*, Mary Sheedy Kurcinka author of *Raising Your Spirited Child*, Tamar Chanksy author of *Freeing*

*Your Child from Anxiety*, and Washington Post columnist Suzanne Nelson I learned these ideas:

### Give the worry a name

Somehow giving a worry a name makes it feel less scary and more manageable. My favourite picture storybook for toddlers *There's a Hippopotamus on our Roof* by Hazel Edwards personifies fear of the dark as a friendly hippo. Much more friendly and easier to boss around if you're a child.

### Put your worries in a jar

Wouldn't it be great to put all your worries into a safe and throw away the key? As an adult you may do this when you take time out to watch your favourite TV show; or lose yourself browsing for hours online. Children need something a little more practical. They can write their worries on some paper and lock them away in a jar by the side of the bed at the end of the day. It's good to know that their worries can't get out because they are locked up tight.

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## ... How to move your child from worrier to warrior ...

### Limit talking time

Kids have a need to verbalise their worries but talking needs to be contained to prevent their worries from dominating their lives. Set aside ten minutes a day to talk about their worries and then put worry time aside until tomorrow.

### Normalise rather than lionise their anxiety

Anxious kids are very sensitive to their parents' concerns and worries. One way we build their concerns is by continually reassuring them that things will be fine. One reassurance should be sufficient most of the time followed by "I've already talked to you about that." Continually going over old ground can allow worries to linger longer than necessary.

### Worry about the things worth worrying about

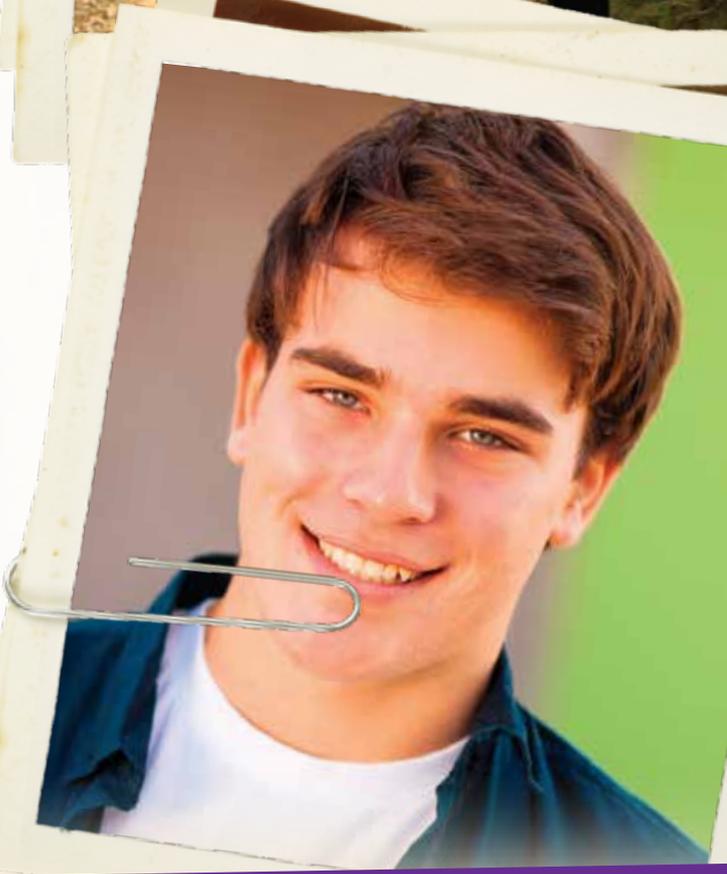
Worrying is energy sapping and can take up too much of anyone's time. As your child gets older it helps him or her to distinguish between what's worth worrying about and what's not. Helping them prioritise their worries makes them feel like they are in control.

### Give them the tools to relax

My wife relaxes in front of the TV, which is sufficient for her to take her mind off her worries. My daughter and I need a bigger set of tools including mindfulness and exercise to help us neutralise our worries. I know when my daughter is physically tired she's less likely to get herself worried or worked up.

It's not that worriers can't function well. They generally over-function as they come to grips with their anxieties. Not only can worrywart children be hard for parents to live with, but also they can become difficult partners and friends as adults. This makes childhood the perfect time for parents, not so much to nip worries in the bud but to give natural born worriers some tools and strategies to make life more tolerable now and, importantly, in the future.

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