



A CALM-DOWN TOOLKIT FOR FAMILIES

Calm in Color

Strategies using art, CBT, mindfulness, and other modalities to melt anxiety in kids and teens.

50+ activities · Ages 4 to 15 · Parent & child friendly

Dr. Smita Kapoor, LMFT

For parents, caregivers, and the kids they love

Calm in Color

Strategies Using Art, CBT, Mindfulness and Other Modalities to Melt Anxiety in Kids and Teens

First Edition · 2026 · Written and compiled by Dr. Smita Kapoor, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist.

An important note before you begin. This book is a collection of supportive, evidence-informed activities drawn from art therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness, and related approaches. It is meant for education, connection, and everyday coping. It is not a substitute for assessment, diagnosis, or treatment by a licensed mental-health professional.

If a child shows signs of persistent distress, talks about wanting to die or hurt themselves, stops eating or sleeping, withdraws sharply, or you simply have a worried gut feeling, please reach out to a qualified clinician. In the United States you can call or text 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) any time. A short list of resources appears at the back of this book.

Every child is different. Use what fits, adapt freely, and skip what doesn't land. You know your child best.

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What's Inside

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How to Use This Book

If you picked this up, there is probably a child in your life whose worries sometimes feel bigger than they are: a tummy ache before school, tears at bedtime, a meltdown over a small change, a teenager who lies awake replaying everything that could go wrong. You are not alone, and your child is not broken. Anxiety is one of the most common and most treatable experiences of childhood.

This book gathers the strategies I return to again and again as a family therapist, organized into five modalities: art, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness, body and breath, and a final chapter of other tools, including play, story, music, DBT skills and nature. None of them require special training. All of them work best with a warm, unhurried adult nearby.

Who this book is for

It is written for two readers at once. The explanations and scripts speak to you, the parent or caregiver, so you understand what you're doing and why. The activities and worksheets are designed to be done with your child, side by side at the kitchen table, not assigned like homework. For older kids and teens, many activities can be handed over to do independently once you've introduced them.

Reading the age labels

Every activity carries one or more age pills so you can find the right fit at a glance. Treat them as a starting point, not a rule. A sensitive seven-year-old may love a "teen" reflection, and a stressed teenager may secretly enjoy finger-painting.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

A GENTLE WAY TO START

Don't try to teach a skill in the middle of a meltdown. Practice these tools when everyone is calm: on a lazy Sunday, in the car, at bedtime. A skill rehearsed in calm becomes a tool available in the storm.

How to move through it

You don't have to read front to back. If you want the science, start with the next section. If you need something for tonight, jump to the Quick-Reference Cards at the back and pick one breathing tool and one grounding tool. Then come back and explore a chapter that matches your child's temperament: artistic kids often open up through Chapter 1; logical, verbal kids tend to click with Chapter 2; restless, body-driven kids settle fastest with Chapter 4.

KEEP IT LIGHT

If an activity creates pressure or power struggles, stop. The goal is never to "do the worksheet correctly." The goal is a calmer body, a more flexible thought, and a child who feels accompanied rather than fixed.

Understanding Anxiety in Kids & Teens

Before the tools, a little understanding, because the way you think about your child's anxiety changes the way you respond to it, and your response is itself one of the most powerful tools in this book.

What anxiety actually is

Anxiety is not a flaw or a bad attitude. It is the body's built-in alarm system doing its job, just at the wrong time or at the wrong volume. That system kept our ancestors alive by preparing them to fight, flee, or freeze in the face of danger. In a modern child, the same ancient alarm can fire over a spelling test, a sleepover, a news headline, or nothing nameable at all.

A useful definition for families: **anxiety is the feeling of fear or dread about something that hasn't happened yet.** A small amount is normal and even helpful; it's what makes us prepare. It becomes a problem when it shows up too often, lasts too long, feels too big for the situation, or starts shrinking a child's world by making them avoid the things they care about.

THE BRAIN, SIMPLY

Picture two parts of the brain. The "**downstairs brain**" (the amygdala) is fast, emotional, and protective. It slams the alarm. The "**upstairs brain**" (the prefrontal cortex) is the wise, calm thinker that can reason and plan, but it's slower and still under construction all through childhood and the teen years. When anxiety spikes, the downstairs brain takes over and the upstairs brain goes briefly "offline." This is why "*just calm down*" and logical arguments don't work mid-panic; the thinking brain isn't reachable yet. The tools in this book work by first soothing the downstairs brain (breath, body, art, senses) so the upstairs brain can come back online.

What it looks like: the many disguises of anxiety

Anxiety rarely announces itself by name. Children, especially younger ones, don't say "I'm feeling anxious." Instead it leaks out sideways, and is easily mistaken for defiance, laziness, clinginess, or drama. Learning to recognize the disguises is half the battle.

- **In the body:** stomachaches, headaches, racing heart, feeling sick before school, trouble falling asleep, needing the bathroom often, a "lump" in the throat.
- **In behavior:** meltdowns over small things, refusing or avoiding (school, parties, trying new things), clinginess, asking the same reassurance question over and over, perfectionism, anger and irritability, freezing up, or a sudden need for control.
- **In thoughts:** "what if" loops, expecting the worst, harsh self-criticism, trouble concentrating, replaying mistakes.

REFRAME OF THE DAY

Much of what looks like a "bad kid" is actually a scared kid. Anger is often anxiety wearing armor. When you see the fear underneath the behavior, your whole tone changes, and a regulated, curious adult is the fastest path to a regulated child.

How anxiety shows up at different ages

AGE	COMMON WORRIES	HOW IT OFTEN SHOWS
Little (4 to 7)	Separation, the dark, monsters, bad dreams, loud noises, being away from a parent	Clinging, crying at drop-off, bedtime resistance, tummy aches, regression (baby talk, accidents), big tantrums
Middle (8 to 12)	School performance, friendships, fitting in, getting in trouble, family or world events, illness	Reassurance-seeking, perfectionism, avoidance, irritability, somatic complaints, trouble sleeping, over-planning
Teen (13 to 15)	Social judgment, the future, identity, body image, grades, social media, big global worries	Withdrawal, irritability, procrastination, all-or-nothing thinking, late-night rumination, physical tension, "I'm fine"

Five principles that make every tool work better

1. **Connect before you correct.** A child has to feel safe and seen before any strategy can land. Get low, soften your face, and acknowledge the feeling first: "That looks really hard. I'm here."
2. **Name it to tame it.** Putting a feeling into words, or onto paper, literally calms the alarm centers of the brain. Naming is not indulging the worry; it's the first step to shrinking it.
3. **Co-regulate first.** Your calm is contagious. Children borrow our nervous systems before they can run their own. Slow your breath, lower your voice, unclench your jaw. Your body is teaching theirs.
4. **Don't rush to fix, or to rescue.** Removing every hard thing teaches a child that they can't cope. The goal is to help them face manageable challenges with support, building the felt sense of "I can do hard things."
5. **Practice in calm, use in storm.** Skills are like fire drills. Rehearse them when the building isn't burning.

*You are not raising a child who never feels anxious.
You're raising one who knows what to do when they are.*

CHAPTER ONE

The Art of Calm

*Art therapy strategies: drawing, color, clay and collage to
move big feelings out of the body and onto the page.*

Why Art Quiets Anxiety

When a child is anxious, the feeling often has no words. It's a knot, a buzz, a heaviness. Asking them to "talk about it" can feel like asking them to describe a color they've never seen. Art offers a side door. A crayon, a lump of clay, or a torn-up magazine lets a feeling become something a child can see, hold, and change, without needing the right vocabulary.

There's real science underneath the crayons. Making art is rhythmic and absorbing, which shifts the nervous system out of high alert. It engages the sensory, nonverbal parts of the brain where overwhelming feelings tend to live, giving them a route out. And the simple act of externalizing a worry, getting it out of the body and onto the paper, creates a little distance, so the child becomes the artist looking at the worry rather than the person trapped inside it.

THE POINT ISN'T PRETTY

This is the single most important rule of therapeutic art: **it is about the process, never the product.** Never judge, fix, or even praise the skill ("what a beautiful house!"). Instead, get curious about the experience: "Tell me about what you made." The magic is in the doing, not the result.

Setting up a low-pressure art space

You don't need an easel or expensive supplies. A few sheets of paper, a box of crayons or markers, some kid scissors, an old magazine, and a bit of playdough cover almost everything in this chapter. Lay an old towel down so mess isn't a source of new stress, and sit down to make something alongside your child. Doing it with them, rather than watching, takes away the spotlight and the performance pressure.

The Worry Monster

EXTERNALIZING · 15 TO 20 MIN · PAPER, CRAYONS/MARKERS

Anxiety feels less overwhelming when it becomes a character your child can look at, name, and even boss around. Invite them to draw their worry as a monster or creature. What color is it? Big or small? Spiky or fuzzy? What does it say to them?

1. "If your worry was a monster, what would it look like? Let's draw it." Resist steering. Let it be theirs.
2. Once it's drawn, get curious: "What's its name? What does it like to say to you? When does it get bigger?"
3. Now they take charge: draw a cage around it, give it silly slippers, shrink it down, or draw themselves as a giant standing next to a tiny monster.
4. Decide together what to do with the drawing: keep it in a "worry box," fold it up small, or wave it goodbye.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

TRY SAYING

"So your worry monster is named Gloop, and Gloop gets really loud at bedtime. I wonder what would make Gloop feel sleepy too? Should we draw Gloop a tiny blanket?"

Color Your Feelings (Feelings Map)

EMOTIONAL LITERACY · 10 TO 15 MIN · PAPER, COLORS

Help your child build a "feelings vocabulary" by assigning a color to each emotion: maybe red for angry, blue for sad, yellow for happy, grey for worried. Then draw an outline of a body (a gingerbread shape) and let them color where they feel each feeling. Worry in the tummy? Color it there. This builds the crucial skill of noticing feelings in the body before they boil over.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Scribble & Squeeze (the angry/anxious scribble)

TENSION RELEASE · 5 MIN · PAPER, CRAYON

For fast-rising energy, hand over a dark crayon and a big sheet and say, "Put all of that feeling into the paper. Scribble as hard and fast as you need to." The big, rhythmic motion discharges adrenaline through the muscles. When the storm passes, you can look at the scribble together and find a shape hiding in it to gently color in, moving from chaos toward calm.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Clay & Playdough Squish

SENSORY / SOMATIC · 10 MIN · CLAY OR PLAYDOUGH

Squeezing, rolling, and pounding clay is deeply regulating. It gives anxious hands a job and provides "heavy work" that calms the nervous system. Invite your child to squish their worry into the clay, then reshape it into something that feels safe or strong: a smooth stone to hold, a shield, a sleeping animal. The transformation from "worry blob" to "calm object" is the therapy.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

FOR THE SQUIRMY ONES

Sensory-seeking kids who can't sit still often do best here. Pair clay with a quiet conversation: hands busy, mouth free. Many children say hard things far more easily when they don't have to make eye contact.

The Safe-Place Drawing

VISUALIZATION · 15 MIN · PAPER, COLORS

Ask your child to draw a place, real or imaginary, where they feel completely safe, calm, and happy. A treehouse, a beach, grandma's kitchen, a fort made of clouds. Encourage rich detail through the senses: What do you see? Hear? Smell? Who is there with you? Once the drawing exists, it becomes a portable anchor. In an anxious moment you can say, "Close your eyes and go to your safe place. Remember the warm sand?" You've helped them build a calm room inside their own mind.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Worry Collage / Vision of Calm

EXPRESSIVE · 20 MIN · MAGAZINES, GLUE, PAPER

For older kids and teens who roll their eyes at crayons, collage feels more grown-up. Flip through magazines and tear out any images, colors, or words that capture how anxiety feels, then make a second collage of what calm or safety looks like. Putting the two side by side externalizes the contrast and quietly points the mind toward the calmer image. Great for teens who'd rather curate than draw.

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Mandala & Pattern Coloring

MINDFUL ART · 10 TO 20 MIN · PRINTED PATTERN, COLORS

Coloring inside a repeating, symmetrical pattern is a gateway to mindfulness. The gentle, predictable structure soothes, while the focus on color and edge pulls attention away from racing thoughts. Keep printed mandalas in a "calm-down folder" so a child can reach for one independently when they feel the buzz starting. (A blank mandala frame is included in the worksheets.)

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

WHEN TO GENTLY LOOK CLOSER

Art is expression, not diagnosis. One dark drawing is not an emergency, and reading too much into a single picture can do harm. But if disturbing themes (violence, hopelessness, self-harm) appear repeatedly, treat it as your child communicating something they can't say aloud, stay calm and curious, and consider looping in a licensed therapist.



Next: when the feeling does have words. Teaching kids to catch and change anxious thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

Thinking Differently

*CBT strategies: helping kids catch the worried thought,
check whether it's true, and choose a kinder, more flexible
one.*

The Big Idea Behind CBT

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is the most researched, most effective approach for childhood anxiety, and at its heart is one simple, life-changing idea: our thoughts, feelings, and actions are all connected. What we think shapes how we feel, which shapes what we do. Anxiety hijacks this loop by feeding kids a stream of scary, exaggerated thoughts, and because young children believe their thoughts are simply true, they react to the scary movie in their head as if it were really happening.

The CBT shift is to teach kids that **thoughts are not facts**. They're more like passing trains, or guesses the brain makes, and you can choose which ones to board. We're not forcing fake positivity ("just think happy thoughts!"). We're teaching a child to become a thought detective: to notice the worried thought, examine the evidence, and decide whether it's worth believing.

THE CBT TRIANGLE

Thoughts, feelings, and actions all loop into each other. You can enter the loop at any corner. Change the thought ("maybe I'll be okay") and the feeling softens. Change the action (take one brave step) and the thought updates ("huh, that wasn't so bad"). This chapter works the thought corner; the brave-steps ladder works the action corner.

Step one: externalize the worry

Just like the Worry Monster in Chapter 1, CBT for kids often starts by giving anxiety a name and a character: "the Worry Bully," "Mr. What-If," "the brain's overprotective guard dog." This separates the child from the anxiety. It's not that they are the problem; it's that the Worry Bully is being pushy again. Now it's the two of you versus the worry, instead of you versus your child.

Boss Back the Worry Bully

EXTERNALIZING + ASSERTIVENESS · 10 MIN

Once the worry has a name, teach your child to talk back to it. The worry says, "Everyone will laugh at you." The child practices a comeback: "Thanks for trying to protect me, Worry, but I've got this." Make the comebacks strong, even a little sassy. Humor drains the worry's power. Practice out loud, take turns being the worry and the boss.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

TRY SAYING

"Sounds like Mr. What-If is loud today. Let's hear what he's saying, and then let's tell him who's the boss. Ready? I'll be Mr. What-If: *What if you forget your lines?! ...* Now you boss him back."

Step two: become a thought detective

This is the engine of CBT, cognitive restructuring, made kid-sized. When a worried thought shows up, we investigate it like a detective looking for evidence instead of swallowing it whole. The goal isn't to prove the worry wrong; it's to find a more balanced, realistic thought.

Catch It, Check It, Change It

COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING · 10 TO 15 MIN

1. **Catch it.** Notice and write down the worried thought exactly as it sounds: "I'm going to fail the test."
2. **Check it.** Put it on trial. What's the evidence it's true? The evidence it might not be? Has the worry been wrong before? What would you tell a friend who said this?
3. **Change it.** Build a fairer, kinder thought you actually believe: "I'm nervous, but I studied, and even if I miss some, I'll be okay." Not fake-happy. Just true and balanced.

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

The Detective Questions

SOCRATIC QUESTIONING · USE ANYTIME

Keep these on a card for the "check it" step. Ask gently. You're a curious partner, not a debater:

- What's the worry telling you will happen?
- How likely is that, really, out of 100?
- What's the evidence for it? What's the evidence against it?
- What's the most likely thing to happen (not the worst)?
- If it did happen, how would you cope? Who could help?
- What would you say to a friend who had this worry?

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

WATCH YOUR OWN REFLEX

The hardest CBT skill for parents is resisting the urge to reassure ("Don't worry, you'll be fine!"). Constant reassurance feels loving but secretly teaches the child that the worry is dangerous and that they need you to make it go away. Instead of answering the worry, coach the child to answer it themselves: "Hmm, what does your detective brain say?"

Naming the thinking traps

Anxious brains fall into predictable patterns. When kids can name the trap, they can step out of it: "Oh, that's just my brain catastrophizing again." Teach these as funny, recognizable characters:

THINKING TRAP	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
The Fortune Teller (catastrophizing)	"I just know it's going to be a disaster." Predicting the worst as if it's certain.
The Mind Reader	"Everyone thinks I'm weird." Assuming you know what others are thinking, and that it's bad.
All-or-Nothing	"If I'm not the best, I'm a total failure." No middle ground, only black and white.
The Magnifier	Blowing one small mistake up into the biggest deal in the world.
The Filter	Noticing only the bad and screening out everything that went fine.
Should Monster	"I should always get it right." Harsh, rigid rules that fuel guilt and pressure.

The Worry Scale (how big is it really?)

RIGHT-SIZING · 5 MIN

Anxious kids treat every problem like a 10. Draw a thermometer or ladder from 1 ("tiny bump") to 10 ("true emergency"). When a worry hits, ask: "Where does this sit on the scale?" Then compare: "Where would a real emergency be?" This builds perspective and teaches that most worries are 3s and 4s dressed up as 10s, and that small problems get small reactions.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Worry Time & the Worry Box

CONTAINMENT · 10 MIN/DAY

For kids whose worries leak all day long, schedule a daily 10 to 15 minute "worry time." Worries that pop up outside that window get written on a slip and dropped in a worry box: "We'll deal with you at 5 o'clock." Most worries shrink or vanish by then. At worry time, sort the slips into "problems I can solve" (make a plan) and "things I can't control" (practice letting go). This contains the worry instead of letting it run the whole day.

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Working the action corner: the Brave Ladder

Thoughts change feelings, but so does doing. The most powerful CBT tool for anxiety is gradual exposure: facing feared situations in small, manageable steps so the brain learns, through direct experience, "I can handle this, and the fear fades on its own." Avoidance is the fuel anxiety runs on; brave steps are how we drain the tank.

Build a Brave Ladder

GRADED EXPOSURE · ONGOING

Pick one fear the child wants to overcome (say, sleeping in their own room). Together, break it into a ladder of small steps from easiest to hardest. Climb one rung at a time, repeating each until it feels boring before moving up. Celebrate every rung. Bravery is doing the thing while scared, not waiting for the fear to disappear first.

1. **Bottom rung:** Read a bedtime story in my own room with the door open.
2. Fall asleep with a parent sitting in the room.
3. Parent sits just outside the door.
4. Parent checks in every 5 minutes.
5. **Top rung:** Fall asleep on my own, knowing I'm safe.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

WHY THIS WORKS

When we avoid a fear, we feel instant relief, which rewards the avoidance and makes the fear grow. When we stay in a manageable fear, the body's alarm naturally peaks and then comes down on its own (this is called habituation). The child learns in their bones that anxiety is a wave that always passes, and that they're stronger than it told them.

CELEBRATE BRAVE, NOT CALM

Praise the effort and the courage, not the outcome or the absence of fear: "You felt scared and you did it anyway. That's real bravery." This teaches that fear and action can coexist, which is the whole game.

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Next: stepping out of the thinking mind entirely. The power of the present moment.

CHAPTER THREE

Here & Now

Mindfulness strategies: anchoring a racing mind in the present moment, one breath, one sense, one heartbeat at a time.

Why the Present Moment Is Medicine

Notice where anxiety lives in time: it lives in the future. "What if I fail tomorrow? What if they don't like me? What if something bad happens?" The anxious mind is a time traveler, constantly racing ahead to dangers that haven't arrived. Mindfulness is the gentle practice of coming back. Back to the breath, the body, the sounds in the room, this single moment, which is almost always okay.

Mindfulness simply means **paying attention to right now, on purpose, without judging it**. For kids we add a crucial word: kindly. We're not trying to empty the mind or stop thoughts; that's impossible and frustrating. We're teaching a child to notice when their attention has wandered into worry, and to gently walk it back, like guiding a puppy that keeps running off. Every time they notice and return, that's the rep that builds the muscle.

WHAT THE PRACTICE GROWS

Regular mindfulness has been shown to calm the brain's alarm center, strengthen the thinking brain's ability to regulate emotion, and lower the body's stress response. In kids it's linked to better attention, less reactivity, and improved sleep. Think of it as daily strength training for the part of the brain that says, "It's okay, we're safe right now."

How to teach it (without the eye-rolls)

Keep it short, playful, and concrete. No incense or lotus positions required. Young children can't "meditate" abstractly, but they can blow on a pinwheel, listen for a bell, or feel a stuffed animal ride their belly. Make it a game, do it together, and keep sessions tiny: even 60 seconds counts. Practice daily in calm moments so the skill is ready when anxiety strikes.

Belly Buddy Breathing

BREATH AWARENESS · 3 MIN · A SMALL STUFFED ANIMAL

Have your child lie down and place a favorite small stuffed animal on their belly. Their job: breathe slowly so the buddy rides up on the in-breath and down on the out-breath, like a gentle boat on the sea. This makes invisible breath visible and turns slow breathing into a game. "Can you give your buddy the slowest, smoothest ride?"

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

The Five Senses Anchor (5-4-3-2-1)

GROUNDING · 3 TO 5 MIN · ANYWHERE

The single most useful tool in this book for an anxious spike. It yanks attention out of the worried future and into the safe present by walking through the senses:

1. Name **5** things you can **see**. Look around slowly.
2. **4** things you can **hear**, near and far.
3. **3** things you can **feel**: feet on the floor, shirt on skin.
4. **2** things you can **smell** (or two smells you like).
5. **1** thing you can **taste**, or one slow breath to finish.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

POCKET VERSION

Teach the 5-4-3-2-1 so well that your child can run it silently at school or in bed, with no one knowing. A grounding tool that travels is a grounding tool that gets used.

Mindful Eating: the One Raisin (or Chocolate Chip)

SENSORY FOCUS · 5 MIN · ONE SMALL SNACK

Give your child a single raisin, berry, or chocolate chip and slow everything way down. Look at it like a scientist seeing it for the first time: the ridges, the color. Smell it. Place it on the tongue without chewing. Notice the taste, the texture, the urge to gobble. Finally, chew slowly and follow the flavor. This teaches that full attention transforms even something tiny, and that the mind can be trained to slow down.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Listening for the Bell

ATTENTION TRAINING · 2 MIN · A BELL, CHIME, OR APP

Ring a bell or chime and ask your child to raise a hand the very instant they can no longer hear it, really straining to follow the sound as it fades into silence. This sharpens focused attention and naturally lengthens and slows the breath. A favorite because it feels like a game, not a chore.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Glitter Jar / Calm-Down Jar

VISUAL METAPHOR · MAKE ONCE, USE OFTEN

Fill a clear jar with water, clear glue, and glitter. When you shake it, the swirling glitter is just like a mind full of anxious, racing thoughts. You can't see clearly through the storm. Set it down and watch together as the glitter slowly settles. "Our minds are like this jar. When we're upset everything is swirling. We can't make the glitter settle faster by force. We just breathe and wait, and it always settles. Then we can see clearly again." A perfect quiet companion to slow breathing.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

TRY SAYING

"Your thoughts are swirling really fast right now, and that's okay. Mine do that too. Let's set our glitter jar down and just watch it settle while we breathe. We don't have to do anything. The glitter always settles."

The Body Scan (melting check-in)

BODY AWARENESS · 5 TO 10 MIN · LYING DOWN

Wonderful at bedtime. Guide your child to travel slowly through the body with their attention, starting at the toes and moving up to the top of the head. At each stop, notice what's there, tight or loose, warm or cool, tingly or still, and imagine that part going soft and heavy, "melting into the bed like warm butter." This releases the physical tension anxiety stores in the body and is a gentle on-ramp to sleep.

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Thoughts Are Clouds (or Leaves on a Stream)

DECENTERING · 5 MIN

A powerful idea for older kids: you are not your thoughts. You're the sky, and thoughts are just clouds passing through. Invite them to picture each worried thought as a cloud drifting across the sky, or a leaf floating down a stream. They don't have to chase it, fight it, or hold onto it. Just watch it come and let it float away. This builds the skill of letting thoughts pass instead of getting hooked by every one. The sky is always still behind the weather.

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Mindful Walk & the Five-Finger Trace

MOVEMENT + BREATH · 5 MIN

Two portable favorites. On a mindful walk, go slowly and become a detective of the senses: the crunch underfoot, the breeze, three different bird sounds, the color of the sky. For the five-finger trace, spread one hand and use the other finger to trace slowly up each finger as you breathe in, and down as you breathe out. A built-in calming tool a child always carries with them.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

KEEP EXPECTATIONS GENTLE

Kids' minds wander constantly. That's not failure; it's the practice. Never frame mindfulness as something to be "good at." The whole skill is simply noticing you drifted and coming back, with kindness, again and again.

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Next: going straight to the body's control panel. Breath and the nervous system.

CHAPTER FOUR

Calm Bodies

Breath and somatic strategies: using the body's own controls to switch off the alarm and tell the brain, "We are safe."

The Fastest Door to Calm

Here's something remarkable: you can't simply decide to lower your heart rate or relax your gut. Those are run by the automatic nervous system. But there's one automatic function you can control directly, and it's a master switch for all the others: your breath. Slow, long exhales send a direct signal up to the brain that the danger has passed, switching the body from "fight or flight" into "rest and digest." This is why breathing tools work when nothing else can reach a panicking child. They bypass the thinking brain entirely.

THE EXHALE IS THE SECRET

It's not deep breathing that calms. It's slow breathing with a long out-breath. The exhale activates the vagus nerve and the body's natural brake (the parasympathetic system). The simple rule for every tool here: **make the out-breath longer than the in-breath.** Breathe in for a count of four, out for a count of six. That longer exhale is the off-switch.

Balloon Breathing

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATH · 2 MIN

Rest hands on the belly. Breathe in slowly through the nose and imagine inflating a big balloon in the tummy. Feel it rise. Then breathe out slowly through the mouth and let the balloon deflate all the way down. Pick a balloon color together. Slow, low belly-breaths (not high, shallow chest-breaths) are the foundation of every other technique.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Birthday Candle & Hot Cocoa

LONG-EXHALE BREATH · 2 MIN

The simplest way to teach a long exhale to little ones. Smell the hot cocoa (slow breath in through the nose), then gently blow to cool it (long, slow breath out). Or: smell the flower, blow out the candle. For an extra giggle, hold up fingers as "candles" and blow them out one by one. Each one needs a nice long breath.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Square / Box Breathing

PACED BREATH · 3 MIN

Trace a square in the air or on a palm with one finger. Up one side: breathe in, 4 counts. Across the top: hold, 4. Down the other side: breathe out, 4. Across the bottom: hold, 4. Trace the square a few times. The visual shape plus the steady count gives an anxious mind something orderly to hold onto. Great for older kids and teens, and discreet enough for a classroom.

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Finger / Star Breathing

TACTILE BREATH · 2 MIN

Spread one hand into a star. With the pointer finger of the other hand, trace slowly up the outside of the thumb while breathing in, and down the other side while breathing out. Continue up and down each of the five fingers. The touch anchors attention and the five fingers naturally pace five slow breaths. A calming tool that's always with them.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Discharging the storm through the body

Sometimes a child is too activated to breathe slowly. Their body is flooded with adrenaline and needs to move it out first. Anxiety is, at its root, mobilized energy with nowhere to go. These somatic tools give it an exit.

Squeeze & Melt (Progressive Muscle Relaxation)

TENSION RELEASE · 5 TO 8 MIN

Teach the body the difference between tense and relaxed by doing both on purpose. Move through the body squeezing each muscle group tight for 5 seconds, then releasing into floppy softness. Kid-friendly images make it fun: squeeze lemons in your fists, scrunch your face like you smelled something stinky, be a turtle pulling your shoulders to your ears, squish your toes into the sand. After each squeeze, "melt" like ice cream in the sun. Ends with a body that's genuinely, physically relaxed.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Heavy Work & the Big Shake-Out

ENERGY DISCHARGE · 5 MIN

When a child is buzzing, give the energy a job. Heavy work, like pushing against a wall, carrying something weighty, animal walks (bear crawl, crab walk), or wrapping in a tight "burrito" blanket, provides deep pressure that calms the nervous system. Or do a shake-out: shake the whole body wildly like a wet dog for 20 seconds, then go completely still and notice how the body feels. Animals literally shake off stress. So can we.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Cool Air & the Senses Reset

FAST DOWN-REGULATION · 1 MIN

For an overwhelming moment, a splash of cool water on the face or stepping outside into fresh air can help an overwhelmed nervous system down-shift, paired with a few slow exhales. Quick, portable, and especially useful for teens riding out a wave of panic.

A mindful caution: use coolness only as a gentle reset toward comfort, never as anything unpleasant, and skip it entirely if a child dislikes it. The aim is always more comfort, never less.

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

MOVE FIRST, TALK LATER

If a child is too revved up to talk or breathe slowly, don't start with words. Jump, dance, run, or shake first to burn off the adrenaline. Then the slow breathing and the conversation become possible. Body first, brain second.

• • •

Next: rounding out the toolbox. Play, story, music, DBT skills and the outdoors.

CHAPTER FIVE

More Tools for the Box

Play, story, music, movement, DBT skills, gratitude and nature, because no single tool fits every child or every moment.

The More Tools, the Better

A well-stocked toolbox means a child always has options. What soothes one kid leaves another cold; what works on Monday flops on Friday. This chapter gathers powerful approaches that don't fit neatly into the first four. Each one is a doorway to calm that some child, somewhere, needs.

Play & story: the native language of childhood

For young children especially, play is therapy. Kids process fears through pretend far more naturally than through conversation. A child who can't say "I'm scared of the doctor" will happily give a teddy bear a checkup and tell the bear, "Don't worry, it won't hurt." Play gives them mastery over what frightens them.

Stuffed-Animal Doctor (or Brave Teddy)

THERAPEUTIC PLAY · 15 MIN

Before a feared event, like a doctor visit, a first day, or a dentist appointment, let your child be the one in charge by acting it out with toys. They play the doctor; teddy plays the nervous patient. As they comfort and coach the bear ("You'll be okay, I'm right here, take a big balloon breath"), they rehearse the very coping they'll need and turn passive fear into active mastery.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

The Brave Hero Story

NARRATIVE THERAPY · 15 MIN

Tell or write a story about a character, a small dragon, a young astronaut, a kid just like yours, who feels a big worry and finds a way through it using the very tools in this book. Let your child help write the ending where the hero is brave. Externalizing the struggle into a story makes it safe to explore, and the hero's success becomes a template the child can borrow. Bonus: have them illustrate it.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Journaling & the Letter to Worry

EXPRESSIVE WRITING · 10 MIN

For kids who process through words (often teens), writing is a release valve. Try free "brain dumps" before bed to empty a racing mind onto the page, a gratitude list, or a letter written to their anxiety: "Dear Worry, I know you're trying to protect me, but..." Putting feelings into words organizes them and creates distance from them.

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Music & movement

The Calm-Down Playlist & Drumming

MUSIC THERAPY · ONGOING

Music reaches the emotional brain directly. Build two playlists together: one to match and release a big mood, and one to shift toward calm (slower tempos, around 60 beats per minute, mirror a resting heart rate). For younger kids, drumming or clapping out a rhythm, fast when you feel fast, then slowing it down together, is a body-based way to literally slow down. Teens often regulate through music more than anything else; honor it as a real tool, not just background noise.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Dance It Out & Yoga Shapes

MOVEMENT · 10 MIN

Movement burns off anxious energy and floods the body with feel-good chemicals. Have a 3-song dance party to shake off a hard day, or learn a few simple kid-yoga poses with calming animal names: "child's pose" to curl up small and safe, "tree" to find balance and focus, "cobra" to open up. Gentle stretching paired with breath is a moving meditation.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

A few DBT skills, kid-sized

Dialectical Behavior Therapy adds two powerful ideas worth borrowing: distress tolerance (getting through a hard moment without making it worse) and radical acceptance (stopping the fight against what we can't change).

The Coping Toolbox (a real box)

DISTRESS TOLERANCE · MAKE ONCE

Decorate a shoebox and fill it with soothing, sensory items the child chooses: a stress ball, a soft fabric square, a photo that makes them smile, a list of their favorite breathing tools, gum or a sour candy, a fidget, headphones, a small bottle of bubbles. When anxiety hits, the box gives them concrete, pre-chosen options instead of having to think of coping skills from scratch in a hard moment.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Settle the Body Fast & "This is hard, and I can stand it"

BIG-WAVE SUPPORT · 5 MIN

For a teen in an intense wave, help the body settle first: step outside into fresh air or splash cool water on the face, move the body for a minute (jump, jog in place, dance), then shift to paced breathing with long exhales, and finish with a squeeze-and-melt through the muscles. Pair it with a radical-acceptance phrase: "I can't change that this is happening right now, and fighting it makes it worse. This is hard, and I can get through it." Acceptance isn't approval; it's putting down the second, exhausting struggle.

Teen · 13 to 15

Gratitude, connection & nature

Three Good Things & the Worry/Win Check-In

POSITIVE FOCUS · 5 MIN/DAY

Anxiety wears a negativity filter that screens out the good. Gently retrain attention with a nightly ritual: name three good things from the day, however small. A funny moment, a tasty lunch, a kind friend. Or trade a "rose, thorn, and bud" (something good, something hard, something to look forward to). This isn't toxic positivity. It's widening a narrowed lens so the brain remembers the day held more than the worry.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

Green Time & the Grounding Walk

NATURE THERAPY · 20+ MIN

Time outdoors measurably lowers stress hormones and lifts mood. Make "green time" a regular prescription: a walk, climbing a tree, digging in dirt, watching clouds, or simply standing barefoot on grass and feeling the ground hold you up. Combine it with the mindful-walk senses game from Chapter 3 for a double dose of calm. Nature asks nothing of an anxious child. It just lets them be.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

The Connection Cure

RELATIONSHIP · ONGOING

The most powerful anti-anxiety tool isn't a technique at all. It's a felt sense of being safely connected to you. Protect small daily rituals of warmth: a few minutes of undivided "special time" they direct, a secret handshake, a bedtime check-in, an unhurried hug. A long, firm hug (about 20 seconds) releases oxytocin and steadies the nervous system. When kids feel deeply connected, their baseline anxiety drops, and they're far more willing to try every other tool in this book.

Little · 4 to 7

Middle · 8 to 12

Teen · 13 to 15

MIX AND MATCH

The real skill, over time, is helping your child notice which tools work for them: a calm-down jar for some, a hard run for others, a comic-drawing for another. The toolbox is personal. Let them become the expert on their own calm.

*A child who knows how to come back to calm
carries that superpower for life.*

CHAPTER SIX

Printable Worksheets

Ready-to-copy pages that turn the strategies into something a child can hold, fill in, and keep. Photocopy freely for your own family or classroom.

How Big Is My Feeling Today?

Color in the thermometer to show how big your feeling is right now. Then pick a tool to help it get smaller.

10 · HUGE
9
8
7
6
5 · Medium
4
3
2
1 · Tiny

My feeling is called:

I feel it in my body here:

A tool I will try:

After my tool, my number is now:

Circle how you feel:

Calm	Sad	Worried	Angry
Scared	Happy	Meh	Wobbly

Draw Your Worry Monster

What does your worry look like? Draw it in the box. Is it big or small? What color? Then answer the questions. You are the boss of your monster.

Draw your worry monster here

My monster's name is...

It gets bigger when...

It gets smaller when...

What I boss back to it...

Catch It, Check It, Change It

Be a thought detective. Write down the worried thought, put it on trial, and build a fairer one.

1. CATCH IT · What is the worry saying?

2. CHECK IT · Put it on trial

Evidence it's TRUE:

Evidence it might NOT be true:

How likely is the worst thing, out of 100?

What would I tell a friend who had this worry?

3. CHANGE IT · My fairer, kinder thought

My Brave Ladder

Pick one thing you want to feel braver about. Write it at the top. Then fill the rungs with small steps from easiest (bottom) to bravest (top). Climb one at a time!

My brave goal:

5

4

3

2

1

REMEMBER

Brave doesn't mean "not scared." Brave means doing it while you feel scared. Every rung is a win. Celebrate it!

My Personal Calm-Down Plan

Fill this in when you feel calm, so it's ready when you don't. Keep it somewhere you'll find it.

My body's early warning signs (how I know I'm getting worried):

3 breathing tools that help me:

3 things that calm my body (move, squeeze, cool air...):

My safe place (real or imagined):

People I can talk to:

Something kind I can say to myself:

MANTRA TO MEMORIZE

"This is a feeling. Feelings are like waves. They rise, and they always come back down. I am safe, and I know what to do."

Color-Your-Calm Page

Draw a big circle in the frame below and fill it with your own repeating pattern, then color it slowly, one section at a time. Notice the colors you choose and the feel of the crayon. There's no wrong way. Just breathe and color.

Your calm pattern goes here

Three Good Things from today:

KEEP THESE HANDY

Quick-Reference Cards

*The whole toolkit, distilled. Photocopy or snap a photo for
your phone. Calm at a glance.*

When Your Child Is in the Storm: a 4-Step Response

What to do in the heat of the moment, in order. Your calm comes first. You can't pour from an empty cup.

1. **Regulate yourself.** Take one slow breath. Drop your shoulders, soften your voice. Their nervous system is reading yours.
2. **Connect and name it.** Get low, get warm. "You're really scared right now. I'm right here with you. We're okay." Validate before anything else.
3. **Calm the body.** Offer one body tool, not a lecture: "Let's blow out the candles together," a tight hug, a shake-out. Wait for the wave to crest and fall.
4. **Then problem-solve.** Only once the thinking brain is back online: "Now, what does your detective brain say? What's one small brave step?"

BREATHE IN 60 SECONDS

- Balloon: belly out on in-breath, soft on out-breath
- Candle & cocoa: smell in, blow out slow
- Box: in 4, hold 4, out 4, hold 4
- Finger trace: up the finger in, down the finger out
- Golden rule: out-breath longer than in-breath

GROUND IN 60 SECONDS

- 5-4-3-2-1: 5 see, 4 hear, 3 feel, 2 smell, 1 taste
- Feet on floor, press down, feel the ground
- Cool water on the face or fresh air
- Name 3 colors you can see right now
- Hold something textured in your hand

MOVE THE ENERGY OUT

- Shake your whole body for 20 seconds
- Push hard against a wall
- Squeeze & melt every muscle, then go floppy
- Jump, run, or dance one fast song
- Big squeeze hug (deep pressure calms)

SHIFT THE THOUGHT

- Name the trap: "That's the Fortune Teller again"
- Out of 100, how likely is the worst?
- Friend test: what would I tell a friend?
- Boss it back: "Thanks Worry, I've got this"
- And... "I can feel scared AND be brave"

QUICK REFERENCE

What to Say, and What to Skip

The words we reach for matter. Anxiety shrinks when a child feels understood and capable, and grows when they feel dismissed or rescued.

TRY THIS	INSTEAD OF
"I can see this feels really big. I'm here."	"You're fine, there's nothing to worry about."
"It makes sense you feel nervous. Let's breathe together."	"Stop crying / Calm down right now."
"Your brain is trying to protect you. Let's check if the worry is true."	"Don't be silly, that won't happen."
"What does your detective brain say?"	"Don't worry, I promise it'll be perfect." (over-reassuring)
"You felt scared and you did it anyway. That's brave."	"See? That was nothing to be afraid of."
"Let's figure out one small step together."	"Okay, you don't have to go." (rescuing from every fear)
"I believe you can handle hard things. I'll help."	"You're being too sensitive / dramatic."

Build calm into everyday life

Anxiety is far easier to manage when the foundation is steady. These aren't extras. They're the soil the tools grow in.

- **Sleep** is the number-one anxiety regulator. Protect a consistent bedtime and a screen-free wind-down.
- **Movement every day** burns off stress chemicals. Aim for active play, sport, or a walk.
- **Limit the input.** Watch how much scary news, social media, and overstimulation the child absorbs, especially before bed.

- **Predictable rhythms.** Routines and gentle warnings before transitions tell an anxious brain, "You're safe; you know what's coming."
- **Model it.** Let your child catch you naming a feeling and using a tool: "I'm feeling stressed, so I'm going to take some balloon breaths." You are the most-watched coping demonstration in their life.
- **Fuel and water.** Hunger and dehydration crank up anxiety. Sometimes the best first intervention is a snack.

IMPORTANT

When to Reach for More Help

Everyday worries respond beautifully to the tools in this book. But anxiety sometimes needs a professional partner, and asking for that help is a sign of strength and good parenting, not failure.

Consider reaching out to your pediatrician or a licensed child therapist if you notice:

- Worry or fear that lasts most days for several weeks and isn't easing.
- Anxiety that is shrinking your child's world: refusing school, dropping friends or activities, unable to do age-typical things.
- Frequent physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches) with no medical cause.
- Panic attacks, intense fears, or rituals and repeated reassurance that take over daily life.
- Sleep or appetite that is significantly disrupted.
- Big changes in mood, withdrawal, or a child who seems persistently sad or hopeless.

SEEK HELP RIGHT AWAY

If a child ever talks about wanting to die, hurting themselves, or that others would be better off without them, take it seriously and act now. Stay with them, remove access to anything dangerous, and reach out for immediate support. This is never something to handle alone.

Helplines & resources (United States)

RESOURCE	CONTACT
988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline · 24/7, free, confidential	Call or text 988
Crisis Text Line	Text HOME to 741741
SAMHSA National Helpline · treatment referrals	1-800-662-4357
The Trevor Project · LGBTQ+ youth	Call 1-866-488-7386 / text START to 678-678
Your pediatrician · first stop for a referral	Ask for a child therapist or counselor
Find a therapist	Psychology Today directory · school counselor · insurance provider list

If you are outside the U.S., search for your country's crisis line, or contact local emergency services. You don't have to know exactly what to say, just that you're worried about a child and need guidance.

You won't get it perfect. You don't need to.

What heals a child's anxiety isn't a flawless technique. It's a steady, loving adult who keeps showing up, stays calm enough often enough, and helps them learn, one small moment at a time, that hard feelings pass and they are never alone with them.

Keep what works. Adapt the rest. Be as gentle with yourself as you're learning to be with them. You are already doing the most important thing. You're paying attention, and you're here.

With warmth,

Dr. Smita Kapoor, LMFT

Calm in Color · First Edition · 2026

SOURCES

References & Further Reading

The evidence base and inspiration behind the strategies in this book, in APA style, for curious parents and the professionals who support them.

The activities in this book are not original inventions; they are everyday, family-friendly adaptations of well-established, evidence-based therapeutic practices. The references below identify the foundational sources for each approach so you can trace any activity to its origin and read further. Entries follow APA 7th edition style and are grouped by the modality they support.

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A NOTE ON SOURCES

The activities in this book are adaptations of widely practiced therapeutic techniques and are presented for education and family support. Specific wording, examples, and worksheet formats were created for this book and are not reproduced from any single copyrighted source. For clinical work, please consult the primary sources above and a licensed professional. Helpline and web details were accurate at the time of writing and may change. Always verify current information.