

# Anxiety and Autism

Day One

Bristol Autism Team

# Contents

## Part one

- What is anxiety
- Basics – sleep, diet and exercise
- Use the iceberg
- Key principles
- What makes you relaxed and happy?
- Understanding what is anxiety
- Sensory toolkit
- Release the pressure
- Make a Calm plan
- Feeling safe

# Timetable

## Week two –

- managing school related anxiety
- Managing worries

## Week three –

- Introduction to Cognitive behaviour therapy techniques, further resources and help

# Anxiety basics

- **This course is devised to help you and your child manage anxiety better**
- **Anxiety is the most common secondary difficulty facing people with autism**
- **Anxiety is more common in autism than the general population**
- **Anxiety most common reported mental health issue**

# Anxiety basics

- **You won't get rid of anxiety completely it is about managing it or coping with it**
- **A bit of anxiety can be helpful to help us get things done**
- **Talking about anxiety can make you anxious!**
- **When is it a problem? When it interferes with everyday life or severely limits contact with others**

# Definitions of Anxiety



- *The feeling of worry, nervousness or unease about something with an uncertain outcome.*
- *Strong desire or concern to do something, or for something to happen*
- *A response to a threat*

# Anxiety and stress in the body

- **Where do you feel anxiety and stress in your body?**
- **Does your child carry stress and anxiety in the same way?**
- Use relaxation and massage to reduce physical stress in the body

# Common types of anxiety

- **Social anxiety**
- **Performance anxiety – fear of failing**
- **Uncertainty anxiety - fear of the new**
- **Anticipatory anxiety – fear of upcoming event**
- **Anxiety from sensory or information overload**
- **Separation anxiety – fear of being away from mum/dad**



# Common types of anxiety

- **Generalised Anxiety Disorder – worry about everything**
- **Specific phobias**
- **Agoraphobia**
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**
- **Post traumatic stress disorder (specialised approach needed)**
  
- **All these are about avoiding something feared or threatening and cause upset and distress**
- **They are all more severe, long lasting and interfere with life**

# Keys to reduce stress and anxiety

- **Build self esteem (notice and reward your achievements)**
- **Small steps – break it down**
- **Things can take some time to get better**
- **Your child may not understand their feelings or recognise anxiety, so you'll need to explain it to them (more on this later)**
- **Loads of good books, websites, podcasts and resources to use**

# Keys to reduce stress and anxiety

- **Sense of safety through structure, familiar routines, visual supports and preparation for change**
- **Often solutions will be using several different strategies at once**
- **Solutions can be about changing the things around your child eg how others communicate, background noise or allowing them more time to do things**

# Keys to reduce stress and anxiety

- Get some sleep ([sleep@cerebra.org.uk](mailto:sleep@cerebra.org.uk))
- Eat as well as possible
- Don't take on too much
- Don't avoid what you fear (gradually go towards it / get used to it)

# Keys to reduce stress and anxiety

- Try to get your child a trusted circle of people who they can rely on for support and advice
- When you're asking them questions about what makes them anxious, just be interested in finding out how they think; you are not trying to catch them out or show you know the answer

# Keys to reduce stress and anxiety

- Take their fears seriously even if you don't understand them
- Don't over do reassurance, if possible!
- Talk about ways they can manage their fears – help them problem solve ... eg “what do you think you could do?”
- Try not to transmit your own anxiety onto your child
- But do talk about your own anxiety and what to do about it

# Recognise and talk about your feelings

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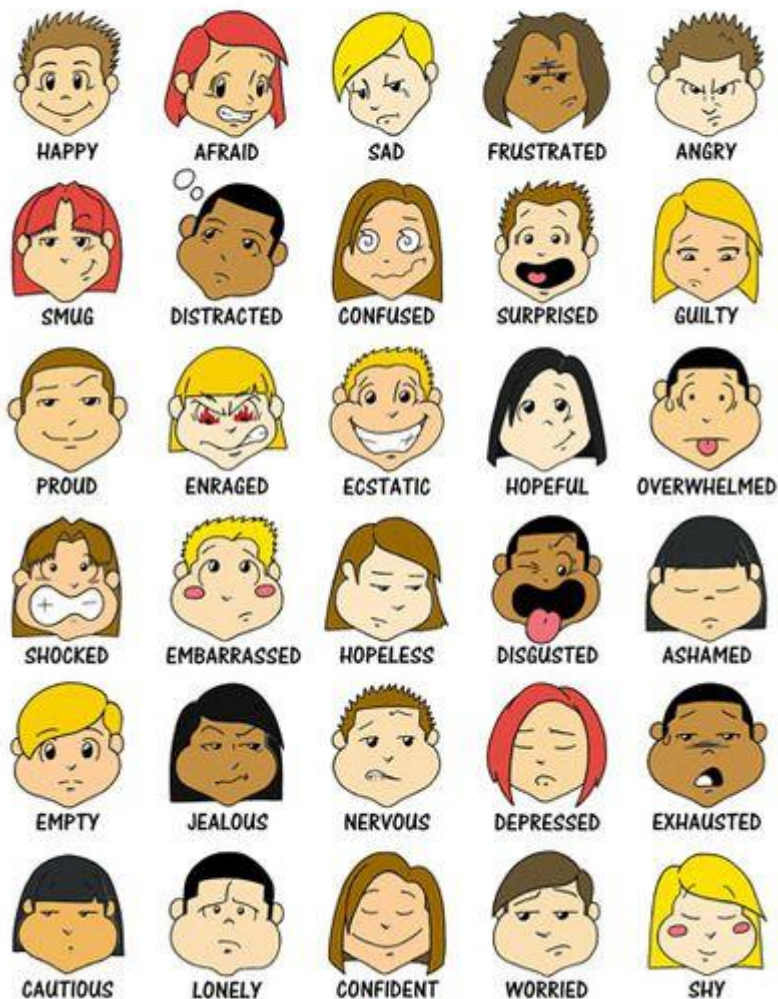
- **Autistic children often find it hard to know what they are feeling and say how they feel so...**
- **Before talking about anxiety, worries and fears etc it is important to ask yourself:**
- **Does your child recognise their own feelings**
- **Has your child got the words to label and explain how they feel?**



# Recognise and talk about your feelings

- If they haven't got the words you can try to label their feelings for them...
- For example: *“how does your body feel when you are eating chocolate ice cream? That's called being happy and lots of other things can make you happy too...”*
- You can discuss where in their body they feel eg head or tummy or both!
- You can use picture and photos and do projects on different feelings at home with them. Use a scrapbook and start with happy then sad then calm then worried or anxious.

# How Are You Feeling Today?



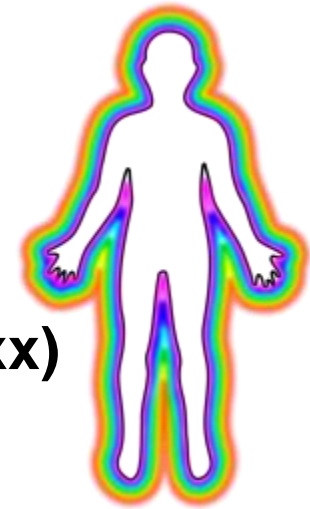
**Better still... use their own photos! These can be stuck on walls to prompt chats about feelings**

Slide 18

# Recognise and talk about your feelings including anxiety

**Explain:**

- **What is anxiety and how it affects the body, thoughts, feelings (eg draw it on a body outline)**
- **We all feel anxiety (eg parent feels anxious when xxx)**
- **You can't get rid of all anxiety**
- **Talking about anxiety...can make you anxious (!), but can also help you manage it**
- **Avoiding it often makes it worse**
- **You can be in control of your anxiety (maybe talk about the amygdala if old enough)**
- **One message to get across is: “Don't let the anxiety boss you around!”**



# Helping your child to understand and communicate their feelings

Visual supports and other ways to communicate how they are feeling

- Emotion boards/ wheels
- Thermometers
- Traffic lights
- Scales
- Emoticons



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# THE ZONES OF REGULATION®



## Blue Zone Tools

Stretch

## Green Zone Tools

Drink water

## Yellow Zone Tools

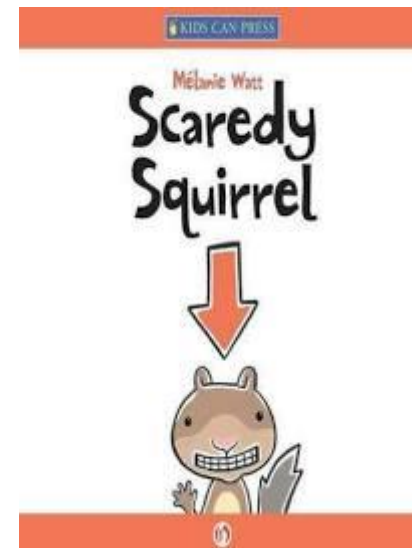
Deep breaths

## Red Zone Tools

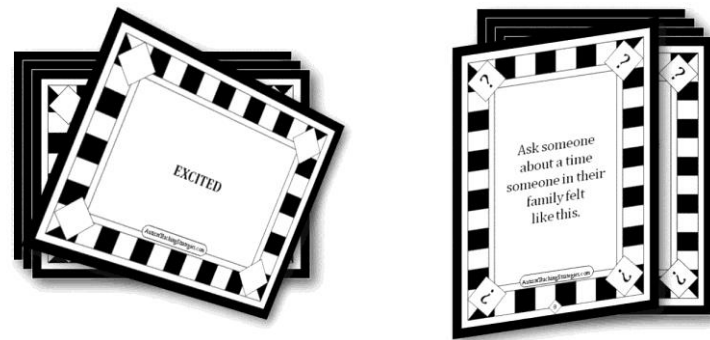
Take a break

# Therapeutic Stories -such as Scaredy Squirrel

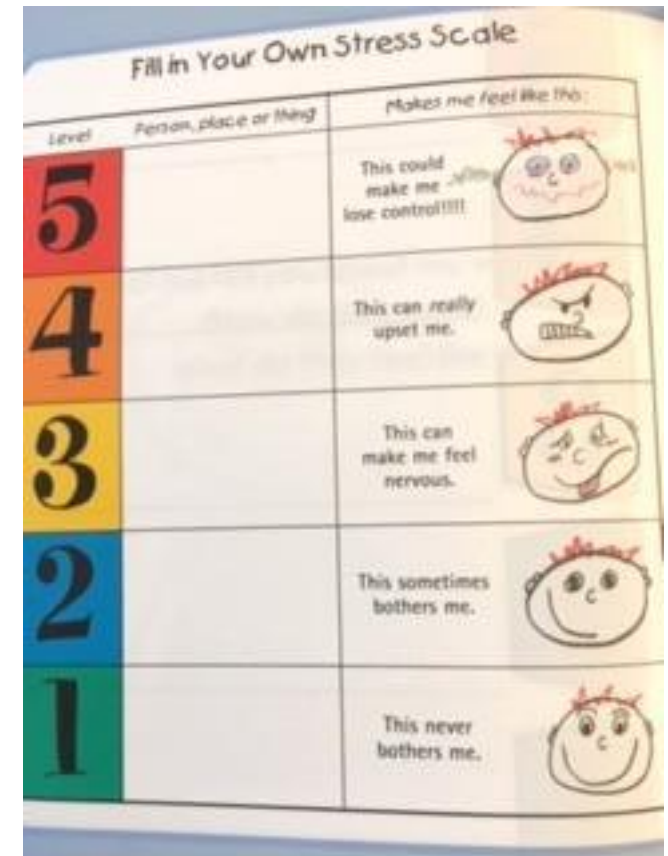
Films - eg Inside Out



Emotions cards game-  
[www.autismteachingstrategies.com](http://www.autismteachingstrategies.com)

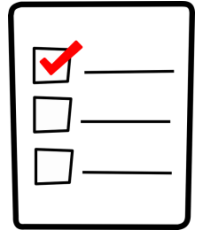


# A '5' could make me lose control!



# Recognise and talk about your feelings

- Buy a special notebook
- Tell your child to write about their moods and worries in the back of the book (but suggest they share them and do something with them!)
- In the front of the book write three good things to be glad about eg something that happened today is a simple technique to use to think about happy stuff
- Or buy a ready made Gratitude journal online
- As parent talk out loud about your feelings and how we make ourselves feel better if we are stressed or anxious





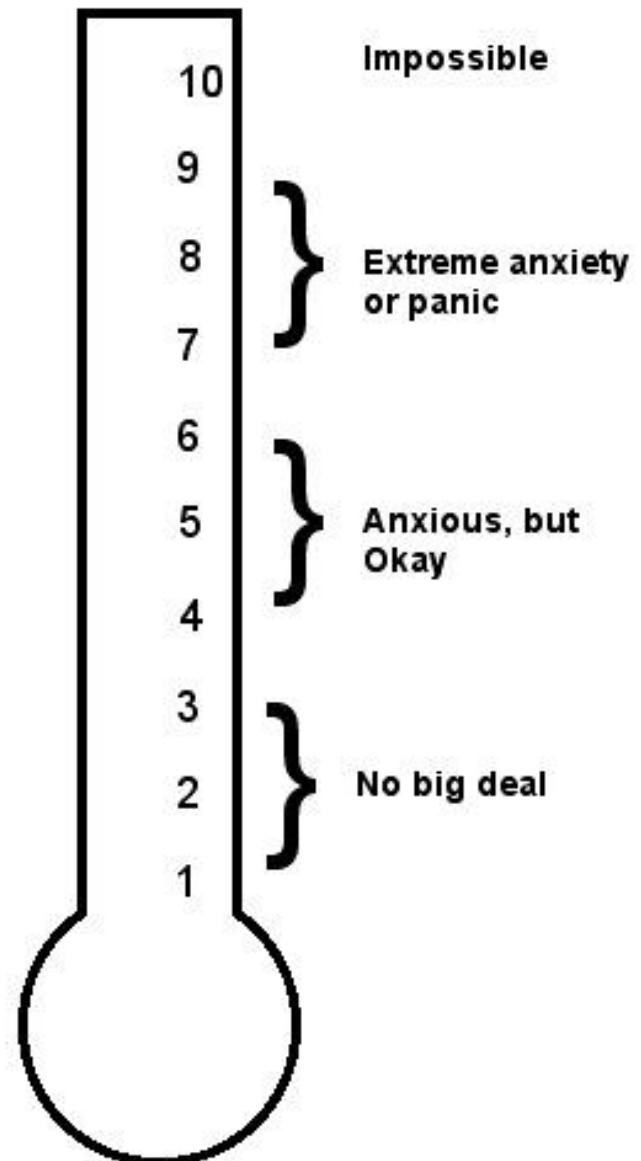
# Get your child to check in how anxious they are feeling

- Use the thermometer to regularly check in with your child....
- ....before anxiety overwhelms or meltdown occurs!

Or use mood bands?



## Stress Thermometer



# Recognise and talk about your feelings

- As well as being able to recognise what they feel we can assist them to manage those feelings
- For example, “if you’re feeling scared.... You can talk to an adult”

# What I can do when I am stressed at home?

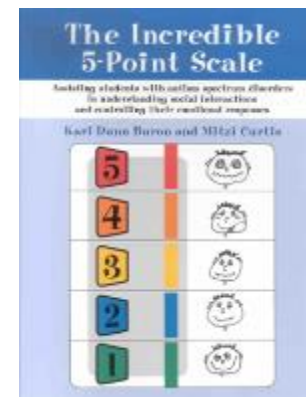
**I can do things to help me feel calm. Things that work for me are:**

- **Planets book**
- **Weighted blanket**
- **Formula 1**

**When I get to number 4 on my thermometer, this means I am getting a bit anxious. I will look at my chart and choose something to do to try to calm down.**

**I can talk to Mum and she will help me solve the problem.**

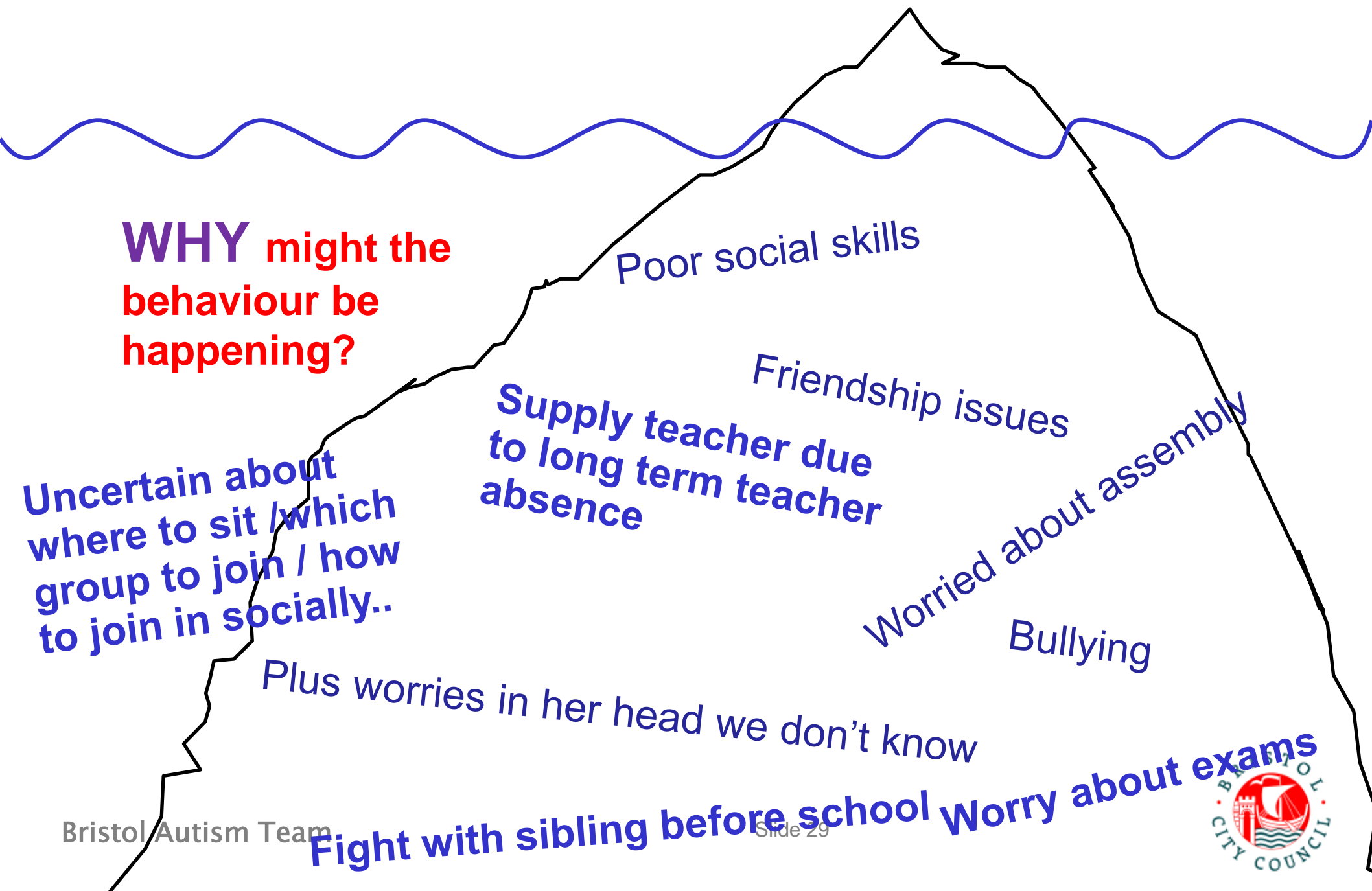
# Using a 5 point scale to plan what to do when anxious



	What I do	How it feels	What I can do
5	Run out	I need to leave	Help me leave Take a walk with me.
4	Stop talking Stare downwards	Scared	Leave the room with permission to go to a safe place.
3	Bite hands	Bit upset	Give me my soft blanket and some TV
2	Keeping to self Still talking with others	Not happy	Talk to a safe person. Get a drink. Go for walk
1	OK	OK	No action needed

# **WHAT** is the Anxious behaviour? – eg refusing school

**WHY** might the behaviour be happening?



# Anxiety in your child

Discuss for 5 minutes and then choose one of your child's anxious behaviours

Now for 10 minutes use the iceberg and write down what things might be causing the behaviour

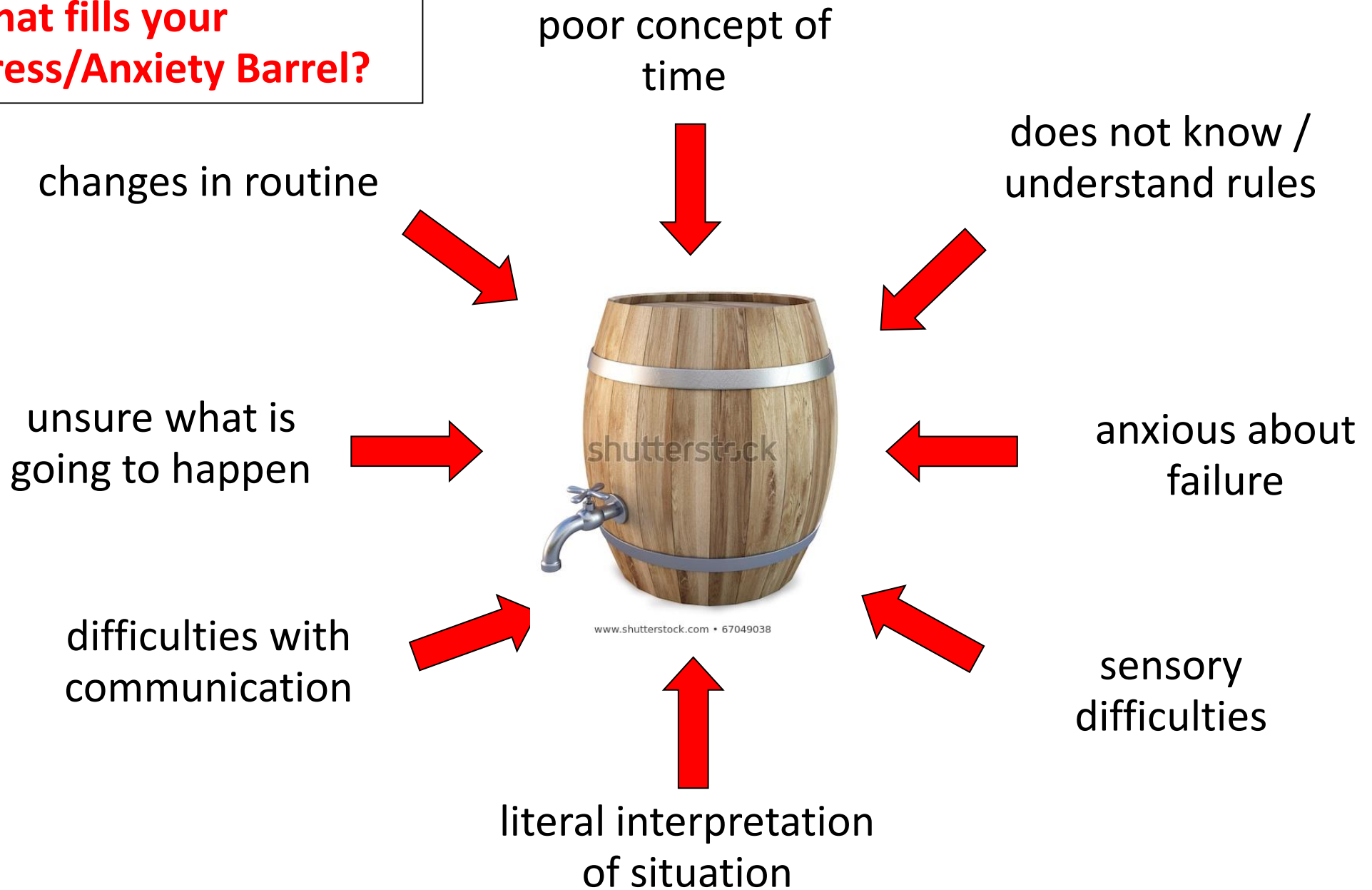
*Don't write down how to make things better* just draw the iceberg and write:

1. what the behaviour is and
2. why you think the behaviour is happening

**WHAT** is the  
**Anxious**  
**behaviour?**

**WHY** might the  
**behaviour** be  
**happening?**

## What fills your Stress/Anxiety Barrel?



*It may be useful to talk to your child about an Anxiety or Stress Barrel /Bucket. We all have some stress so it is rarely completely empty but we can try to avoid it overflowing!*



# Don't wait until it's getting full!

## ***What fills it***

- **Socialising**
- **Change**
- **Making a mistake**
- **Sensory processing**
- **Daily living skills**
- **Sensitivity to other people's moods**
- **Being teased or excluded**

## ***How to release some stress***

- **Solitude**
- **Special interest**
- **Physical activity**
- **Animals and nature**
- **Computer games**
- **Meditation or mindfulness**
- **Sleep**

# What helps them relax and what makes them happy?

- **Discuss**

# Relax and happy checklist

- **Special interest**
- **Drawing/painting**
- **Screen time (can work positively or negatively!)**
- **Walk in the country**
- **Self soothing/stimming**
- **Bubble bath**
- **Read a book**
- **Big soft materials blankets PJs**
- **Soft lighting**
- **Squeeze ball exercise**
- **Aromatherapy**
- **Read a book or magazine**
- **Deep pressure /Massage (may resist soft touch)**
- **Burst bubbles**
- **Drink, small snack**
- **Colouring**
- **Puzzle books**
- **Photo books of happy memories**
- **Eye mask**
- **Time alone**

# Relax and happy checklist

**Muscle relaxation**

**Hot chocolate**

**Relaxing chill music**

**Weighted items**

**Mini massager/Mini fan**

**Soft blanket**

**Play-Doh or clay/Bubblewrap**

**Spinning items/Balloons**

**Essential oils**

**Pets**

**Bike ride, skateboard, walk, swim**

**Bag with calming items in it**

**Smelly candles**

**Yoga poses**

**Meditation**

**Skipping rope**

**Audiobook**

**Noise cancelling headphones**

# Sensory differences

Your child may be under or over sensitive

- Smell
- Touch
- Taste
- Hearing
- Sight
- Balance
- Tactile
- Internal senses – interoception

# Low arousal sensory places for your child

- A calm environment can be important, especially in your child's bedroom
- If your child is very anxious and not a good sleeper think about using an uncluttered environment and plain, pale furnishings and wallpaper
- You can then introduce other items which are helpful to your child



# Creating sensory places at home

**Sensory areas can be created within the home and these can be tailored to meet your child's needs**

- **Pop up tents**
  - **Bean bags**
  - **Place behind sofa!**
  - **Quiet corner with sensory items**
  - **Softer lighting**
  - **Music**
  - **Sleeping bag**
  - **Ball pool**
- ...Also stims should be encouraged if they help**

# Sensory needs

**Meeting your child's sensory needs is about getting the balance of sensory input just right (so your child is calm and alert)**

**You might want to make up a box of items that could be used in the car on journeys or a small bag that can be taken out at other times when you know your child may be over or under stimulated**

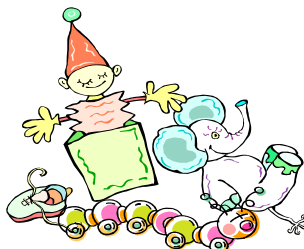
**There might be a similar box/bag for school when getting stressed signs appear**



# Sensory diet items

A portable bag may be useful eg:

- Headphones
- Fidget spinners
- Sunglasses/baseball cap
- Tangle toys
- Water bottle
- Chewing gum
- Snack eg crunchy bars
- Hair elastics/rubber bands
- Key rings
- Portable fan
- Favourite perfume or other smell on hanky
- Photo of favourite people, places
- Flicker books
- Silky material
- Small toys
- Stress ball
- Silly putty
- Traffic light system to alert others!
- Favourite stone or item



# How does your child release pent up anxiety, frustration, and stress?

- **Discuss**

# Release the pressure checklist

- **Go up the park on bike**
- **Exercise, run, gym, Lift weights/gym**
- **Big teddy/big cushion to attack**
- **Trampoline**
- **Climbing**
- **Loud music**
- **Punchbag/ Punch gloves/ Jab pads (...controlled!)**
- **Active sport**
- **Foam sword fights/ old cardboard wrapping paper rolls**
- **Smash things safely/crush some plastic/cans**
- **Write out all your anger and then destroy it/ rip it up**
- **Have a rant**

# What does it look like when your child is anxious?

- Discuss and write down how other people can notice when your child is getting stressed /anxious?
- It could be in their behaviour, things they say etc.

*“when I am stressed I shutdown  
and my face gives nothing away”*

“I cannot  
communicate, I  
lose control of  
the person I  
want to be...  
there’s shame”

# Possible signs your child is getting anxious

**Pacing?**

**Fiddling?**

**Rocking in chair?**

**Talking to self?**

**Going white?**

**Biting nails?**

**Becoming childish, giggly?**

**Feet getting hot?**

**Making animal noises or growling?**

**Flapping hands slightly?**

**Clenching jaw or fist?**

**Becoming very still?**

# Create a calm plan

You may find it helpful to create a calm plan to use within school or elsewhere

1. what causes anxiety/stress
2. what it looks like in your behaviour
3. tactics to use to reduce anxiety/stress (include what adults can do to help as well as your child)

# Calm plan

A5 size!

Laminated!

- **My name is**
- **Things that help with communication**
- **What causes me stress/anxiety/anger**
- **How can you tell if I am becoming stressed/angry**
- **What works to relax me if I am stressed/angry**
- **Key support mentors /staff and their contact details**

Keep it simple!  
200 words

Colourful!

Photo?

# Johnny's Calm plan

## **To help me learn please:**

Explain things clearly

Use simple words

Address me by name

## **Words/things to avoid; they make me stressed -**

Loud noises

Being asked questions in class

Eating in front of others

Touching me

## **How you can tell if I am feeling stressed:**

I fidget

Put fingers in my ears

Answer back more

## **Favourite things to help me calm down if stressed**

Toilet break or take message to staff room

Allow me time on project work - Solar system/ Crystals

Walk around playground perimeter



**Safe people Mrs Smith  
07790 4904901**

**Mohammed Asif Year 9  
Mentor**

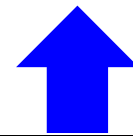
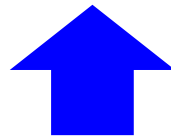
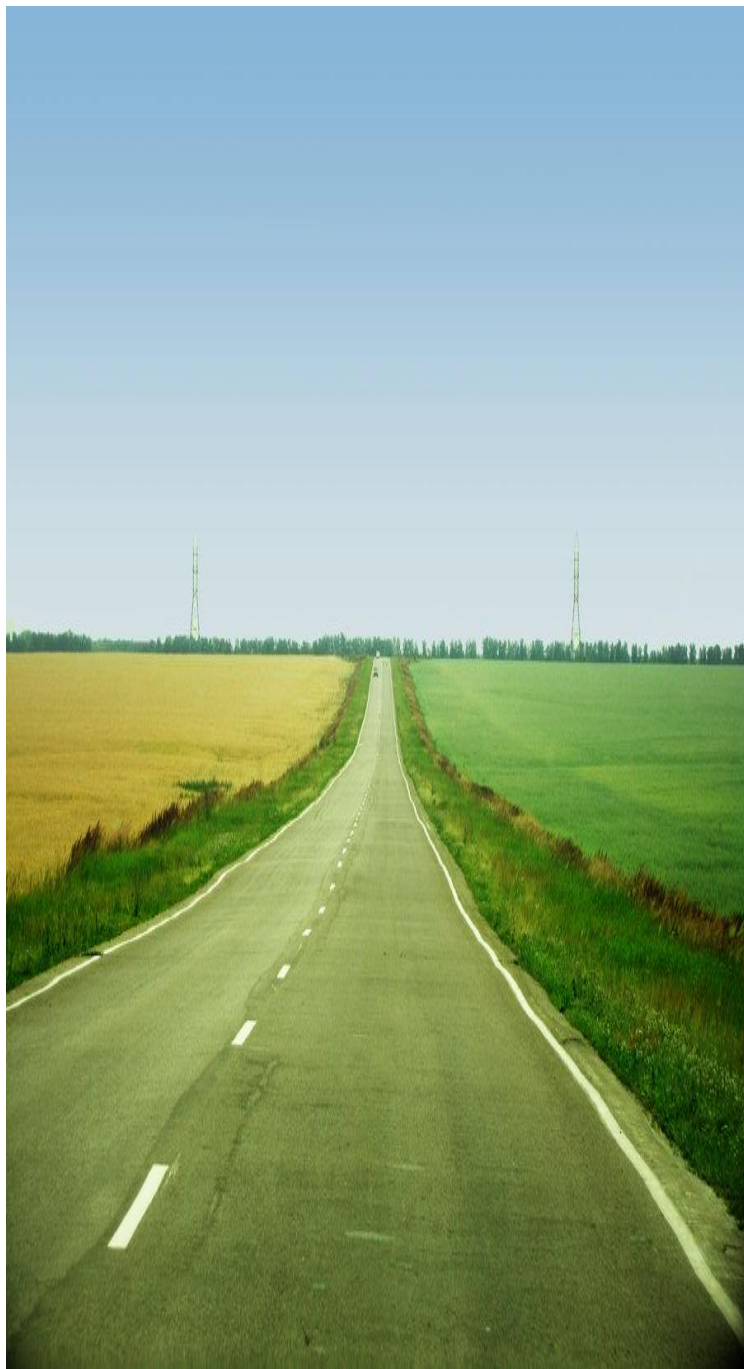
**Safe room library  
/independent learning  
annex (Mr Obi)**



# Feeling safe

This is what my day feels like without my routines...





**Make the road  
ahead clear!**








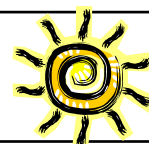

# Four basic questions your child needs answers to!

- ① ***What am I doing?***
- ② ***How long am I doing it for?***
- ③ ***What will I be doing next?***
- ④ ***When will I get to do the things that I really want to do?***



- Answering these consistently and you are onto a winner!
- Can you answer them for yourself?
- What happens if you don't know the answer to one of the above questions at any time?

# Help your child prepare for changes

October 2020						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						
						

Sam's holiday

# Use visual supports to help your child manage anxiety

## Start and finish symbols

- ⑩ First this...then... - helps children to understand the order of doing things

FIRST



THEN



Also reassuring that they will get to do their favourite activity again!

START

FINISH

- ⑩ Start and finish cards

Use technology to  
create a sense of  
safety through  
timetables, and  
routines



Pinterest  
Ebay  
Do2learn etc  
For more ideas

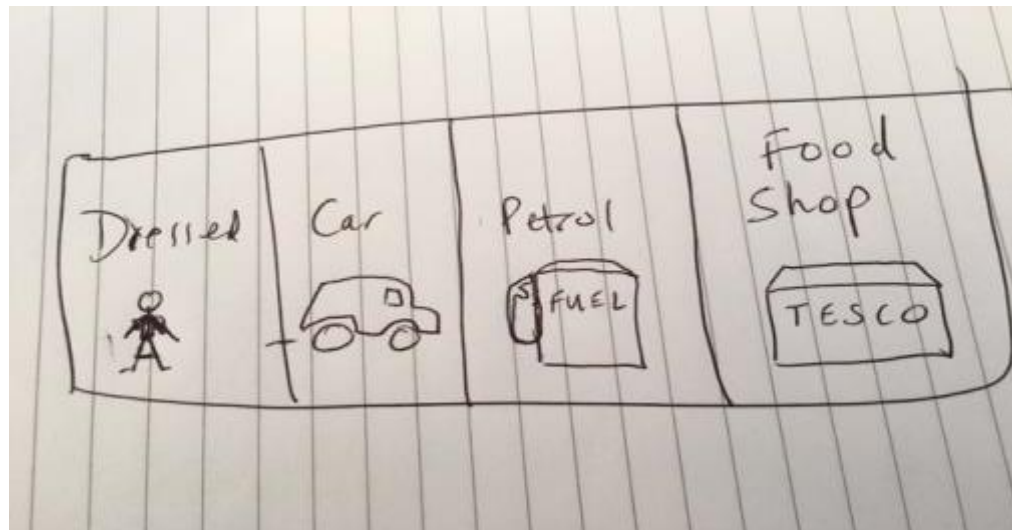
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# Create a sense of safety through pen and paper solutions!



- Use cartoons to quickly explain a change of plan





# End of week one

Next week:

- Managing school based anxieties
- Managing worries