

Bridging the Gap: A Caregiver Storybook Resource Guide for Childhood Anxiety

Amy Rzezniczek, Rachel Krahn, and Dr. Colin King

Western



Mary J. Wright Child and
Youth Development Clinic

Children First for a Stronger Community

Anxiety in Children

- Persistent, recurring intrusive thoughts or feelings that are disproportionate to the perceived threat (APA, 2022)
- One of the most common mental health concerns among children and adolescents globally (Polanczyk et al., 2015)



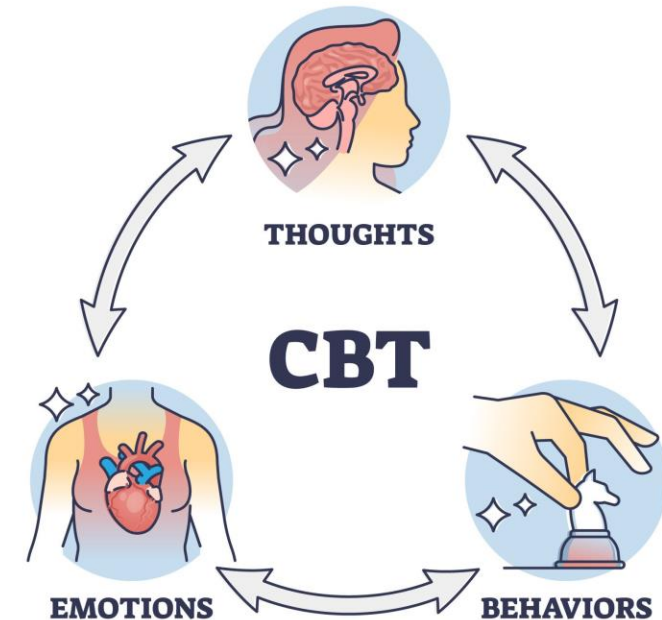
Importance of Early Supports

- Anxiety can have a detrimental impact on various domains of a child's life (Breinholz et al., 2012; Zahl-Olsen et al., 2022)
- **Early support:**
 - Reduces long-term mental health risks (Costello et al., 2003)
 - Promotes the development of coping skills, increases resilience, and improves academic outcomes (Morgan et al., 2016)



Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

- Most common treatment for childhood anxiety (Rapee et al., 2017)
- Child-focused CBT: Children retain anxiety symptoms at the end of treatment (Creswell & Waite, 2016; Warwick et al., 2017)
- CBT strategies can be implemented into children's everyday lives



(“CBT,” 2023).

Stepped-Care Model of Anxiety Support

Tiered Approach to Anxiety Intervention

Goal of stepped-care treatment: Enhance the use of limited resources and decrease treatment costs by starting with low intensity (i.e., first-step) treatments and then moving up to higher-intensity treatment as required (Kendall et al., 2016)

- Parent Knowledge + Anxiety Storybooks

- 3 Hour - Anxiety Workshops for Parents

- School-based Anxiety PD

- Parent/Child Interactive Website Program (M.I. Friends)

- Individual Child/Parent Treatment (~ 1-4 Sessions)
Parent Programs (with Child Component; 4 Weeks)

- Individual Child/Parent Treatment (~ 8-12 Sessions)
- Child and Parent Group Programs (12 Weeks)

Western



Mary J. Wright Child and Youth Development Clinic

Table 1. Stepped care for addressing the emergence of concerning anxiety in youth

| Steps | Who is responsible? | Focus | Nature of effort |
|--------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Step 5 | Coordinated care team | Treatment-resistant anxiety, severe impairment | Intensive programs |
| Step 4 | Mental health professional | Moderate-to-severe anxiety | CBT (individual, family, with pharmacotherapy) |
| Step 3 | Initial therapist involvement | Mild-to-moderate anxiety | Brief CBT, groups, Internet or computer-assisted program |
| Step 2 | Caregivers, youth | Everyday stress, mild anxiety | Guided self-help, bibliotherapy, parent training books, and Internet programs |
| Step 1 | Caregivers, youth, adults | Recognition | Gain knowledge, active monitoring (attend to stability, intensity, and impairment) |

(Kendall, 2016)

Western



Mary J. Wright Child and Youth Development Clinic

Children First for a Stronger Community

Potential Impact of Bibliotherapy

- May be helpful as part of a stepped care model for mental health support
- Has been examined to support knowledge/process in several content areas:
 - Anxiety, Grief, Autism, Bullying (Heath et al., 2005)
- Easily accessed, inexpensive resource



Purpose, Aim, & Framework

- Grounded in a stepped-care model
- Increase accessibility to early anxiety supports for families
- Offer caregivers a developmentally appropriate, structured resource
- Support parent-child conversations about anxiety using storybooks
- Informed by CBT-aligned strategies

Database & Book Selection

- Use of NoveList Plus Database (Wiseman, 2018)
- Key words (anxiety, worry, stress, fear) (1131 books)
- Limited to “picture books”; review of abstract/summary
- Random selection of 100 anxiety picture books from 230 eligible books
- Pilot coding of 20 selected anxiety picture books to establish adequate inter-rater reliability



CBT Module Coding

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Psychoeducation | Info. about the symptoms and support options in a concrete, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate manner that is easy to understand. |
| Self-Monitoring | Attends to their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It provides insight and feedback regarding what requires change. |
| Behavioural Tech. | Strategies that decrease frequency and severity of undesirable behavior while promoting desirable behavior. Focuses on learning direct and concrete skills. |
| Cognitive Restructuring | Cognitive procedures that challenges inaccurate thoughts, all-or-nothing thinking, and misattributions through testing the evidence and problem-solving. |
| Exposure | Focus on experiential learning and emotional arousal. Anxious beliefs are directly challenged and disconfirmed through exposure. |
| Cultural Elements | Depiction of diversity by accurately and sensitively representing the lifestyle, customs, traditions, and/or values of a cultural group. |

Structure and Components of the Guide

The guide is organized into four sections that build from foundational knowledge to practical strategies:

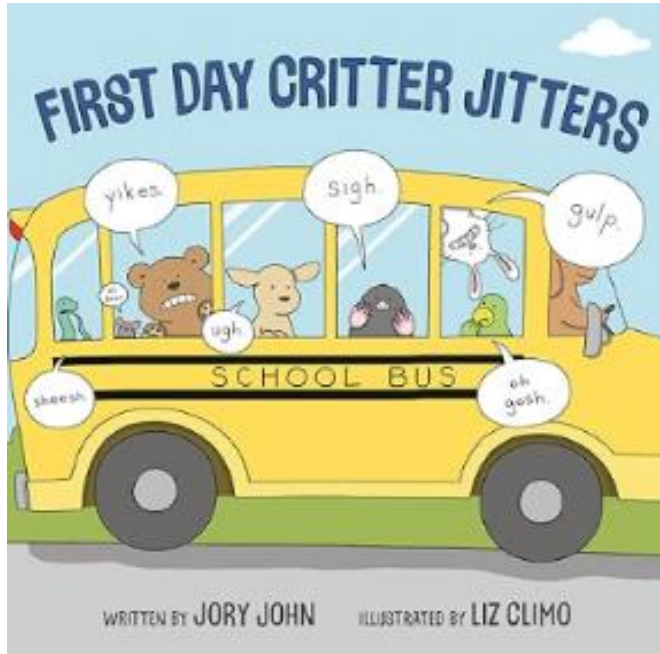
1. **Understanding Anxiety:** Introduces key concepts, definitions, and the impact of anxiety on children
2. **Strategies for Supporting Children:** Covers bravery behaviours, cognitive strategies, and body-based regulation
3. **Overview of Anxiety Types:** Includes brief descriptions and signs of common anxiety presentations
4. **Storybook Finder and Guiding Questions:** Offers book recommendations aligned with anxiety types and guiding questions
 - **Supplementary Finder:** Features 100+ additional storybooks organized by anxiety type

Using the Guide at Home



- **Book selection:** Caregivers and children choose storybooks based on the child's current needs, interests, or anxiety-related concerns
 - **Shared reading:** Books are read together to open conversations about thoughts, feelings, and experiences
- **Guiding questions:** Storybooks include prompts for caregivers to use in facilitating reflection and discussion with their child
- **Strategy exposure:** The guide and storybooks introduce a range of supportive strategies, such as facing fears, rethinking worries, and calming the body
- **Co-regulation:** Caregivers are encouraged to use the strategies alongside their child to support skill development and emotional regulation
- **Ongoing use:** Families are encouraged to revisit the guide as their child's needs change over time

Example Storybook & Guiding Question



(John & Climo, 2020)

First Day Critter Jitters is about a group of animals that feel nervous about starting school and are surprised to learn their teacher feels the same way. Together, they find ways to support one another and show that it's okay to feel anxious.

Example guiding question: “Mouse is worried because all the other kids are bigger than him, Kangaroo is worried about being away from his mom’s pouch, Parrot talks a lot when he’s nervous, and Rabbit has a hard time sitting still in class. Do you relate to any of these critters’ feelings?”

Evaluation Plan

- Ongoing feedback is being collected from caregivers and professionals through a brief online survey
- **Survey focus areas include:**
 - Usability and clarity
 - Relevance of content
 - Confidence in applying strategies
 - Perceived usefulness of storybooks and guiding questions
- Feedback will inform updates to the guide's tone, layout, and content, and will support future resource development, research, and funding applications



Knowledge Mobilization and Next Steps

Workshop and Virtual Launch:

- Caregiver workshop (May 28, 2025): *Supporting Young Children with Anxiety Using Storybooks*
- Virtual launch (Summer, 2025)

Planned Dissemination:

- Distribution is planned through provincial and national partnerships
 - Outreach has been initiated with the London Public Library
- Potential future partners include:
 - School Mental Health Ontario, EarlyON Child and Family Centres, Anxiety Canada

Next Steps:

- Future revisions will be informed by feedback from caregivers and professionals
- Planned funding applications include the SSHRC Insight Development Grant and Partnership Engage Grant

Pilot Testing Invitation

We are currently inviting participants to help pilot test the resource guide!

You can participate by:

- Reading the guide and trying a few storybooks with the guiding questions (for caregivers)
- Reviewing the guide and providing feedback (for professionals who work with children)

If interested, please contact:

Dr. Colin King: cking73@uwo.ca

Acknowledgements

