STRIVE NI

ANXIETY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

RESOURCE BOOKLET

HELLO!

I'm Elaine McCrisken, the founder of STRIVE NI. I have created this resource pack to go directly alongside my Anxiety Based School Avoidance (ABSA) workshop. I feel that ABSA is something which is often misunderstood and it is my hope that sharing my knowledge and understanding will be useful to you - whether you are reading this from a parent/carer or teacher perspective.

I really hope you find this resource pack to be useful. This is a complex topic so I have tried to be succinct while being as detailed as possible.

If you wish to share any part of this document, please get in touch by email: info@striveni.co.uk

Elaine McCrisken
BSc, MSc Psych

What is Anxiety Based School Avoidance?

"...when stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when 'pull' factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the 'push' factors that encourage attendance"

Thambirajah et al, 2008

It is NOT.....

TRUANCY
(where a child is absent from school (or specific classes) out of choice and parents are typically unaware)

SCHOOL WITHDRAWAL
(where a parent may deliberately keep a child at home for other purposes)

School Refusal

The concept of the term 'school refusal' is essentially the same as anxiety based school avoidance (ABSA), however the term is misleading. It implies that the child/young person has control over their attendance and they are refusing to attend. This is not the case with ABSA.

The brain is a complex organ but to simplify things, there are three core areas of the brain which we tend to associate with emotions.

THE REPTILIAN BRAIN

This part of the brain controls some of the most vital functions in our body, most of which we are not even aware of happening throughout the day. It controls our body temperature, heart rate and breathing for example.

THE LIMBIC BRAIN

This part of the brain is where we EXPERIENCE emotions, whether it is an enjoyable or difficult emotion. We feel sadness, anger, happiness and worry for example.

THE PREFRONTAL CORTEX

This is often described as the 'human brain'. It helps us to make decisions, problem solve, think rationally and control our impulses. It is therefore partly responsible for emotional regulation. The prefrontal cortex is still being developed through the teenage years. Research suggests that it is not fully developed until the age of 25!

Imagine you are in a jungle and suddenly you see a tiger catch your eye and start approaching you. Your limbic system will send out a danger signal and activate the fight or flight response. Your heart rate will increase, you might start to sweat and adrenaline will be building.

GREAT!

(when you're in a jungle being chased by a tiger!)

Not so great when you are safe while walking to school, in your classroom or even in your own house. For a lot of our children this is the reality. While the tiger in the jungle is a real threat, school might be a PERCEIVED threat. So that danger signal still goes off and the physical sensations still occur.

Remember

Sometimes it may appear that a child's anxiety disappears quite quickly when they get into the school environment. It is important to remember that it is normal for our anxious feelings to dissipate when the threat (or in this case, perceived threat) disappears. However the cycle may continue again and again each day.

Every child is an individual and will have their own challenges associated with school. Generally there are 4 main functions as to why a child may not attend school.

To avoid situations that may be stressful (e.g. academic demands/social pressures/school environments)

To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school (e.g. anxiety or low mood)

To access tangible reinforcers outside school (e.g. shopping/ playing video games)

To reduce separation anxiety/gain attention from significant others at home

Transitions

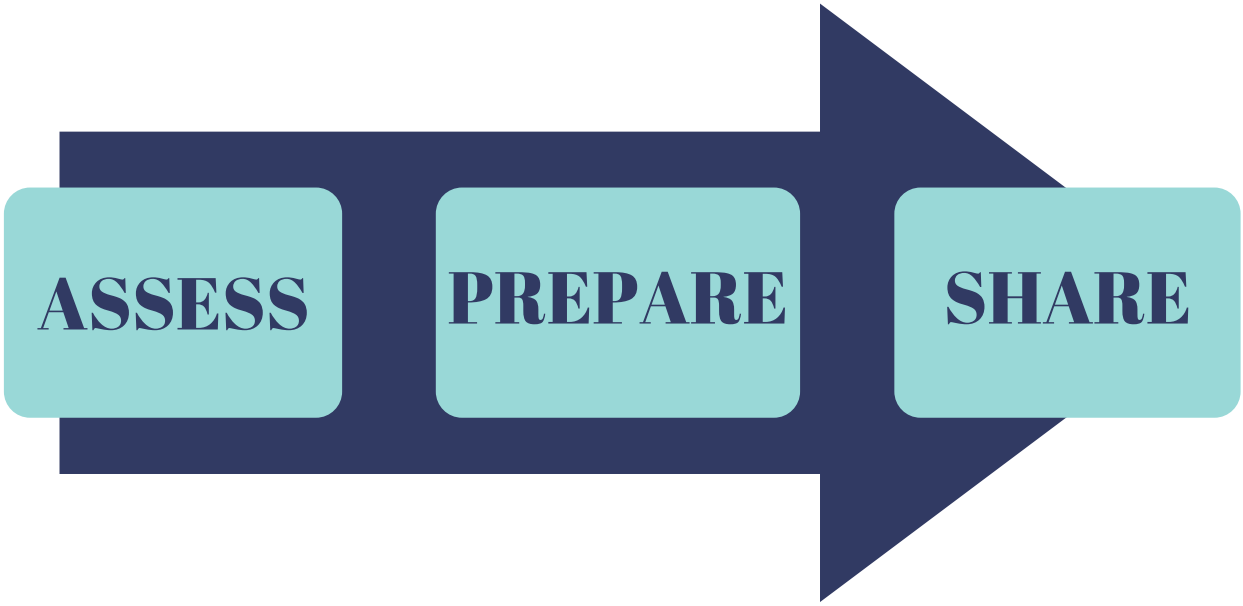
Research has suggested that there are peaks in ABSA during transition periods in educational phases. Typically this would be transition between primary and post-primary. However in reality, children experience multiple transitions throughout one school day.

- Leaving home in the morning
- Travelling to school
- Entering the school buildling
- Entering the classroom

- Moving between classes
- Lessons to break and lunch time
- Between teachers
- From a strong to weak subject

It is vital that information is shared, particularly between Primary and Post-Primary to ensure that each child receives appropriate support from the beginning of term to make these transition periods more seamless.

This model is one which could be used to help support you in facilitating your child's return to school.



ASSESS

Try to recognise what the function of the child's school avoidance may be (see card sorting activity). It is useful to work this out prior to putting strategies and interventions in place.

PREPARE

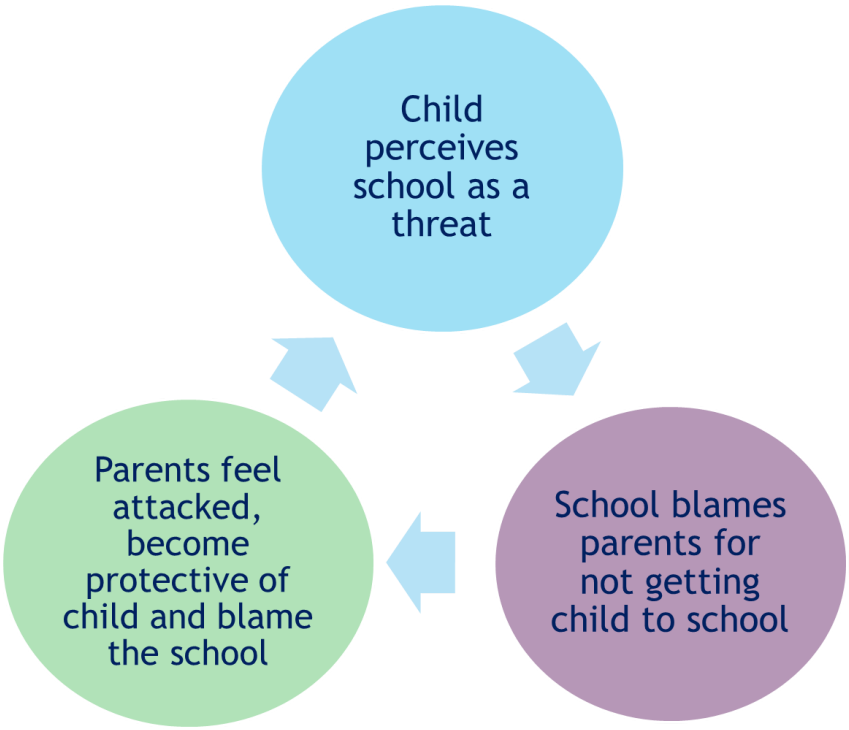
Prepare your child for their return to school. Offer your child an understanding of their anxiety and why they feel the way they do.

SHARE

Share agreed strategies with each other - parents, school and child. The key is to ensure the child is part of discussions to help agree strategies.

Collaboration

For a return to school to be successful, collaboration between school staff, parents and the child is crucial. The cycle below may be a familiar one. Without collaboration, there tends to be blame in all directions.



It can be useful to take a step back and be open, honest and respectful in conversations for the best interests of the child or young person.

PUSH ? PULL

Factors which PUSH a child TOWARDS the idea of attending school. These will be motivating factors.

EXAMPLES

- Academically bright
- Friendships forming
- Successful in sports team

Factors which PULL a child AWAY from the idea of attending school.

EXAMPLES

- Extended absence
- Parental ill-health
- Separation anxiety

It is so important for parents, staff and later the child to discuss and consider what the child's push and pull factors might be. From here you can decide on appropriate strategies while being aware of potential motivations.

Parental Involvement

It is important to recognise that parents may be finding it extremely difficult to talk about their concerns and challenges they experience daily at home. They may feel embarrassed, ashamed and responsible for these circumstances.

- Remember that parents may be an unintentional maintaining factor (consider the push/pull factors).
- Be collaborative with school staff and maintain regular contact (with an agreed member of staff at appropriate times)
- Reach out for support for yourself. This process can be emotionally draining and it is important that you look after your own wellbeing too. Reach out to parent support services like Parentline for guidance.

"You can't pour from an empty cup!"

School Involvement

Schools have a key role to play in supporting a child or young person in their return. It is important that detailed information is sought from staff who have worked closely with or taught the child to help identify any potential triggers or positive strategies.

Some information you may wish to gather:

- Child's strengths
- What is going well?
- Prominent peer relationships
- Any difficulties recognised
- Relationships with adults
- Any known triggers?
- Responses to academic tasks

Thinking about the child...

To date, the child's coping strategy has been school avoidance. By talking about the return to school, you are essentially removing their coping strategy so it is inevitable that they will become anxious when discussing their school attendance.

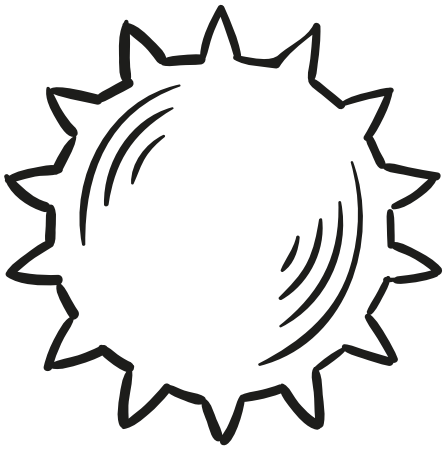
It is important that we:

- Acknowledge and validate their difficult emotions
- Explain that we want to understand things from their perspective
- Don't dismiss their anxiety or worry by telling them not to worry about it!
- Are mindful of our language around the return to school

Before putting any strategy in place, it is important that we offer the child psychoeducation around their anxiety, to enable them to understand their physical signs of anxiety and to know that this is their body's natural response to a perceived threat (like the tiger!) but that they are safe.

Externalising the anxiety

Externalising the anxiety or worry can be a really simple way for children to talk about their anxiety. You are identifying the anxiety as the problem, rather than the child themselves.



Draw it!
Ask your child to draw what their anxiety or worry looks like. Is it a shape? Maybe its an object or an animal?

Describe what it looks like!
If your anxiety was a thing...what would it look like? It might look like a black spikey ball!

Talk about their anxiety using their own words!
How does the black spikey ball get in the way of you coming to school?

The Ideal School Activity

The ideal school activity is a technique we can use to explore your child's thoughts on school and the return to school. Find a time when you can sit with your child (this can be at home with parents or in school with a trusted member of staff)

First, you will explore what kind of school your child would NOT like to go to. Then you will do the same for the kind of school they WOULD like to go to.

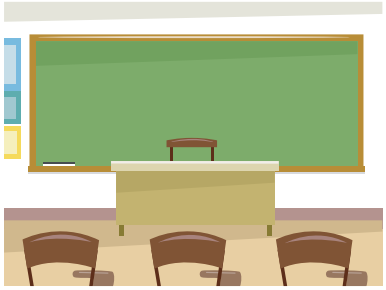
Think about...

The school building & the grounds

The other students

The teachers

Themselves!



The classroom

Stepladder Approach

The Stepladder Approach (or Gradual Exposure) is a strategy which can be very effective when used appropriately. The most important aspect of the Stepladder Approach is that small steps are taken, rather than moving along too quickly.

Hold the spider

Hold the box with the lid open

Hold the box with the spider in it

Look at a spider in a box

Look at a photo of a spider

Think about a spider

Full Day!

Join 4 subjects

Join class for favourite subject

Work in the office but join peers for break & lunch

Work in the school office

Sit in the car park

Psychoeducation

It is so important that we teach our children and young people about their anxiety so they can understand themselves more easily. Your child may talk about having a 'sore tummy' - this sensation could be nervousness or anxiousness.

Remember the tiger in the jungle and the physical sensations we would experience with this threat. School is a 'perceived threat' for many of these children so the physical feelings are very much real.

Develop their language around emotions

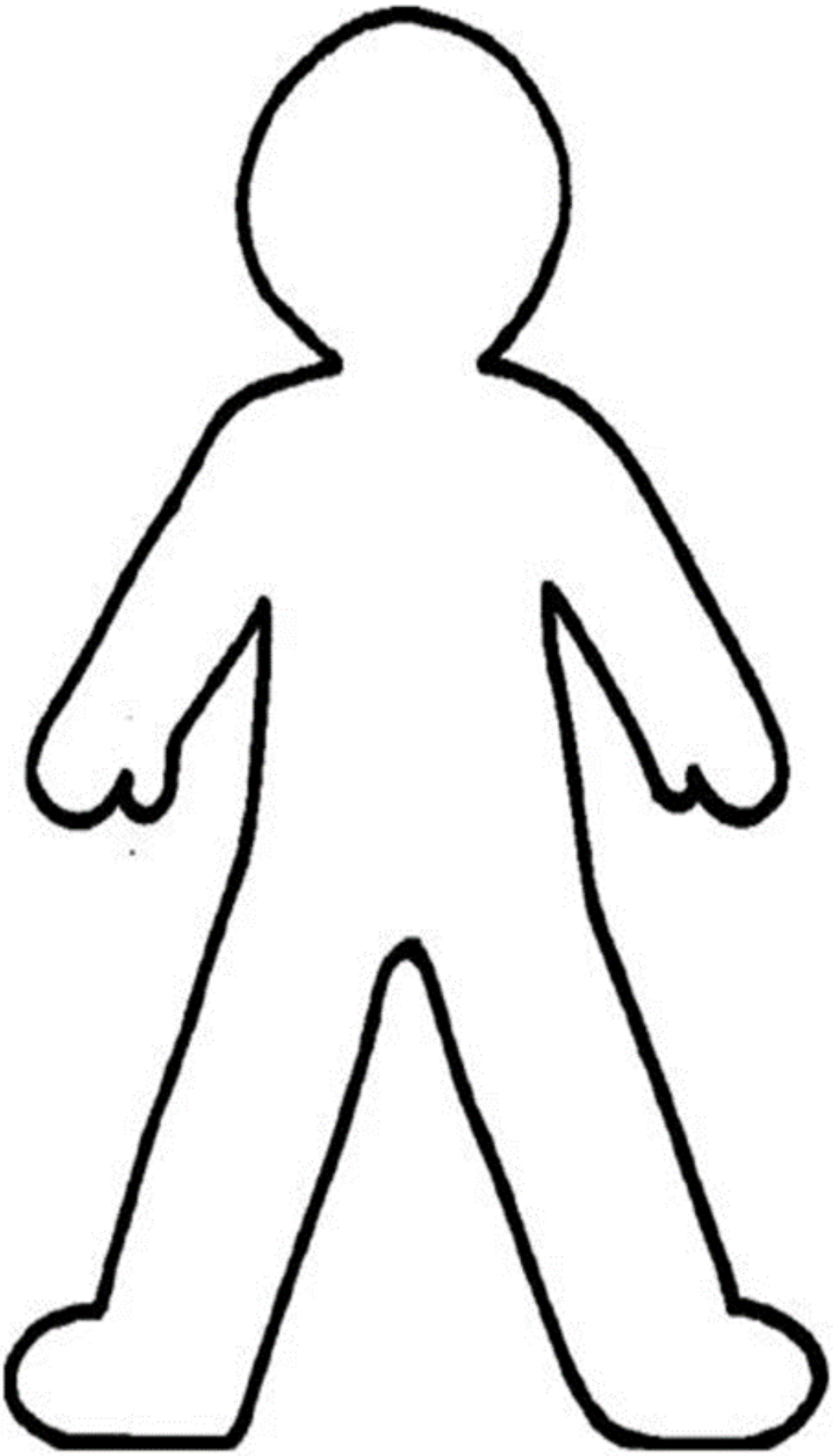
Let them hear you talk about your feelings - both positive and negative. Also talk about strategies you are going to use to help yourself feel better.

I'm feeling a little bit worried about my interview tomorrow. I think I'll take some deep breaths to help myself calm down.

I'm feeling very angry right now. I'm going to count from 1 to 10 in my head to give me time to think.

You can use the template on the following page to support your child in recognising the physical sensations associated with their emotions.

When I feel _____



Card Sorting Activity

This activity helps to identify the FUNCTION of why a child may not be attending school. On this page you will see the 4 main reasons why a child may not be attending school. These are colour coded. On the following pages are some examples of feelings or thoughts that a child may have in relation to their school non-attendance.

You will ask the child to identify whether each statement is a LITTLE bit like them, a LOT like them or NOT like them at all. Work with the child to place each statement under the appropriate heading. The colours in the a LITTLE and a LOT piles are likely to be the function of the child not attending school.

To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school (e.g. anxiety or low mood)

To avoid situations that may be stressful (e.g. academic demands, social pressures or school environments)

To reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention from significant others at home

To access tangible reinforcers outside of school (e.g. shopping or playing video games)

A lot like me

A little like me

Not like me

To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school (e.g. anxiety or low mood)

I feel worse at school compared to how I feel at home

I have bad feelings about school because I'm afraid of something related to school

I have more bad feelings about school compared to others my age

I have bad feelings about school when I think about school at the weekend

I don't always know what to expect in school

Sometimes I find it difficult to understand my feelings

To avoid situations that may be stressful (e.g. academic demands, social pressures or school environments)

I avoid school because its hard to socialise with the other students

If it was easier to make new friends it would be easier to go to school

I avoid places in school where I have to talk to people

I stay away because I had no friends there

Some of the other students say unkind things to me

I find some parts of the school a bit overwhelming

To reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention from significant others at home

School would be easier if my parents stayed with me

I would rather be with my parents than in school

I think about my parents or family often when I'm in school

I would rather be taught by my parents at home than my teacher in school

I feel like my parents need help at home when I'm in school

I find it hard to leave my parents in the morning

To access tangible reinforcers outside of school (e.g. shopping or playing video games)

When I'm not in school on a weekday, I leave the house and go somewhere fun

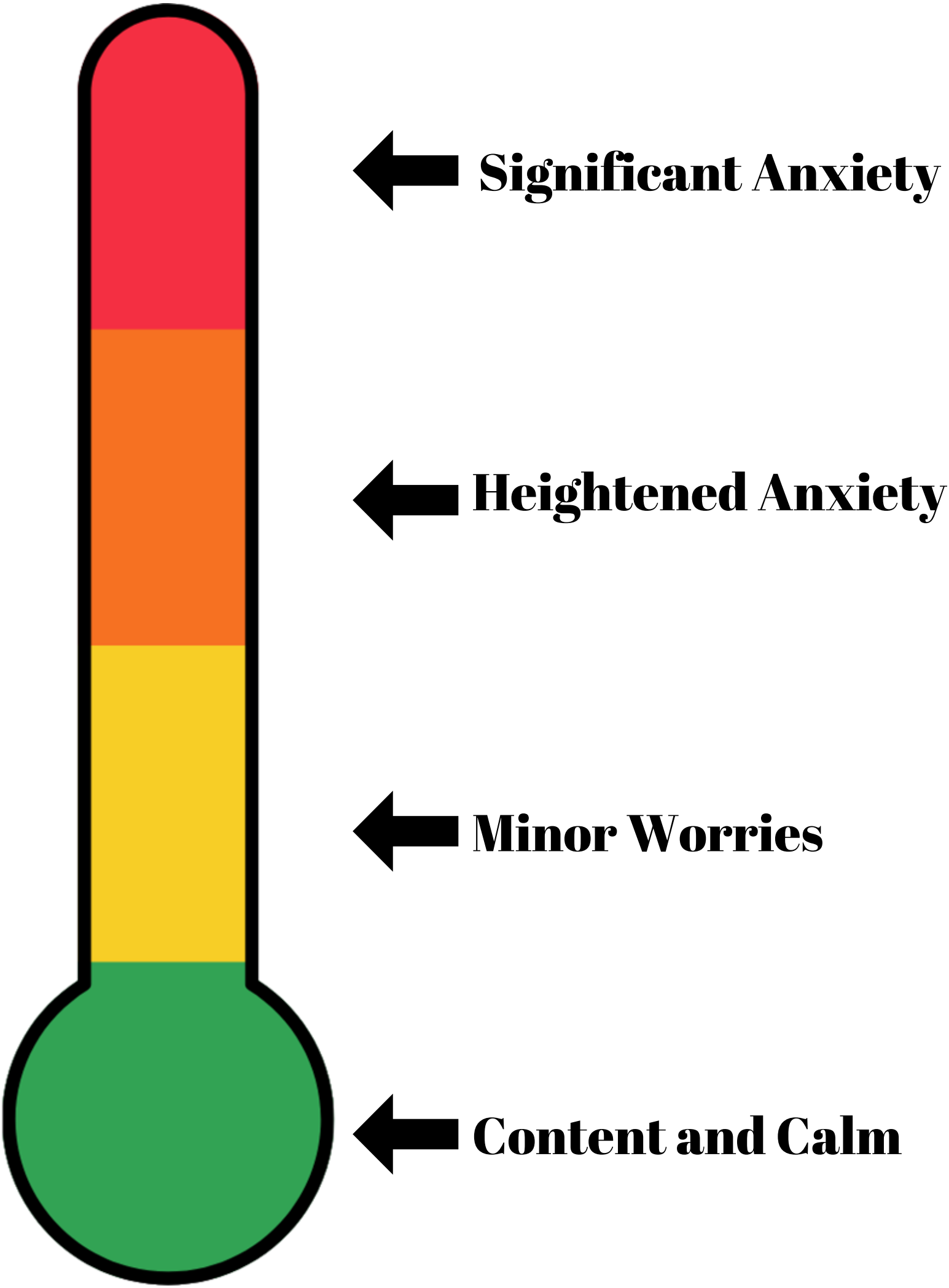
I get to chat to other people when I'm at home during the week

I stay away from school because I want to do more fun things

When I'm not in school on a weekday I enjoy doing different things

When I'm not at school I enjoy playing my games and toys

I love the fun things I get to do when I'm not in school


Significant Anxiety
Heightened Anxiety
Minor Worries
Content and Calm

What if.....?

For some children, anxiety can be heightened when they are unsure what to do if a certain scenario arises. Simple 'what if' cards like this can be really beneficial to offer your child some solutions. to potential problems they may face. These are just some simple examples but there are blank copies on the following pages.

What if I don't know where my classroom is?

- Ask another student
- Ask a teacher
- Check the school map

What if someone calls me names?

- Walk away
- Tell my form tutor
- Tell Mrs Smith

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We really hope you found this booklet useful. Please get in touch with any further queries or if we can support you further in any way.

Email: info@striveni.co.uk