

Simple Phrases for Calming Anxious Students

When a child is feeling worried or anxious, the most helpful thing they can be exposed to is often a calm adult. An adult who is clearly in control and whose words and tone are reassuring will quickly calm a child; our calm is contagious.

This can be challenging for us, as the adult, because sometimes a child's situation or behaviour can trigger difficult thoughts and feelings in ourselves.

These are the moments when we need to "be the swan" – to appear to be gracefully gliding along the surface of the water and hiding the fact that we might be frantically paddling beneath.

Two things that can help us to be the swan are slow-low-low speech and the adoption of a few reassuring "broken record" phrases.

Slow-Low-Low Speech

In order to appear reassuring to a child, we can consciously tap into the tone and register of our own voices and adopt a more calming tone – a slow-low-low tone.

- **Slow:** We slow down our speech, saying fewer words per minute.
- **Low:** We lower the volume, speaking more quietly.
- **Low:** We lower the pitch, speaking a little more deeply.

We do this because it makes us sound calm. Anytime we get anxious or angry, we tend to speak rapidly, loudly and shrilly; we are trying to do the opposite of that, so our words and their tone can feel like a reassuring hug to a worried child.

Broken record phrases

We can say almost anything using our slow-low-low speech, and the child or young person will feel reassured, but it's even better if we can couple our slow-low-low speech with phrases that a child is likely to find especially reassuring.

Different children will find different things helpful to hear and it can be a good idea, at a time of calm, to explore with a child what words they find reassuring when they hit a moment of crisis.

I have generally found that there are three categories of phrases that tend to strike a chord with children, these are phrases linked to safety, phrases linked to physiology, and phrases that validate.

I have shared some examples below, but the best words are often your own so just use these as a starting point.

Safety

Using phrases that reassure a child that they are physically and emotionally safe can be deeply reassuring. Try phrases like:

- I'm here I've got you

- It's okay, you're safe
- I'm going to stay with you
- You're going to be okay
- It's okay to cry
- You're not in trouble

Physiology

It can be helpful to use phrases that acknowledge the physiology of panic and anxiety; that remind the child of the biology behind why they feel how they do right now and that this feeling will not last indefinitely. Try phrases like:

- Your body is responding in an anxious way
- This will pass
- Let's give it a minute and see if you feel just slightly better
- Your body can't feel like this forever
- You've got through this before, you can get through this again

Validation

We need to be careful not to dismiss or minimise a child's concerns; if they feel anxious or panicked, that is a real feeling even if we don't understand or agree with the trigger for this feeling. Acknowledging and validating how a child feels without trying to explain or dismiss it can be very powerful. Try phrases like:

- That must be really hard
- I'm sorry that X is making you feel anxious
- I can see that X is really worrying you, would you like to talk about or draw that?
- I'm going to sit with you until you feel calmer and later we'll begin to unpick your worry
- That sounds hard, do you want to talk about it?
- I can see you're very worried, how can I help you?
- It's not silly, if it's making you feel like this, it matters

A state of overwhelm

I refer to all of these phrases as "broken record" phrases because they work best if we use the broken record approach of saying them again and again and again. When a child is in a state of overwhelm, their thinking and speaking brains will be offline and they will be unable to process our words; but the tone and rhythm and cadence of a much-repeated phrase will feel reassuring and help them to move to a calmer state. As they begin to calm, they will finally be able to start to process and connect with what we're saying.

So, while you might feel like you need to keep reaching for new words and ideas to calm a child, often returning to a stock phrase or two and simply repeating it in your best slow-low-low voice until the child calms can be surprisingly effective.

A few extra pointers

Here are a few bonus pointers that colleagues have found helpful in the past when putting slow-low-low and broken record phrases into practice:

- **Practise at times of calm:** Maybe while walking your dog or taking a shower, practise using your slow-low-low voice and repeat some of your broken record

phrases. This will allow you to return to this way of speaking and these words reflexively in more challenging moments.

- **Learn from support staff:** If you are not sure what words and phrases might work best for a child, try to pick up some ideas from support staff as they will often have go-to phrases they use with particular children. They might not even realise they are doing it, so get curious and learn from what's working well.
- **Share phrases that work:** If you hit upon a phrase that works particularly well for a specific child, share the phrase with all of the adults involved in their care so they can use it as a go-to phrase in moments of high stress too.
- **Make a voice recording:** Some children benefit from having a voice recording made by an adult they trust, using phrases they find helpful. While it is unlikely to be as effective as having the adult in the room, it can be a good alternative during holidays or at weekends and the act of creating the recording with the child shows an investment in them.

It calms you too

A final thing to note about this approach is that it is calming for us as well as for the child we are supporting. So, while we may start off trying to be the swan by employing our best acting skills, repeating the same phrase in calm, reassuring tones can help our body to calm too, which can be very helpful if we start to feel triggered or distressed.

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