

Safeguarding Scenario 19 - She gets anxious sometimes

🔥 “She gets anxious sometimes. She just needs a few minutes to calm down.”

A Year 4 pupil suddenly becomes extremely distressed during the school day. She is breathing rapidly, shaking and crying and tells her teacher: **“I can’t breathe. Something bad is going to happen.”**

She says her heart is beating very fast and repeatedly asks if she can go home. A member of staff takes her to a quieter space and stays with her. After a short while, her breathing begins to settle.

But this isn't the first concern.

Over the past few weeks, staff have noticed that she has become increasingly worried about coming to school. She frequently complains of stomach aches, seeks reassurance from adults and has started asking to go home during the school day.

Would your team know what to do?



The Scenario

As a former Headteacher and now Safeguarding Consultant, this is exactly the type of situation where staff need to respond to the immediate distress while also remaining curious about what may be happening underneath it.

- “She’s always been a worrier.”
- “She just needs to calm down.”
- “There’s nothing actually wrong.”
- “She’ll be fine once she gets distracted.”

But significant or repeated anxiety should not simply be dismissed as “just anxiety.”

KCSIE 2026 reinforces the important role schools play in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. Staff are not expected to diagnose or treat mental health problems, but they should recognise emerging concerns and understand that mental health difficulties can, in some circumstances, become or indicate a safeguarding concern.

DON'T DISMISS THE CHILD'S DISTRESS

During an anxiety or panic episode, the child's experience can feel frightening and overwhelming. Avoid saying:

- “There’s nothing to worry about.”
- “Just calm down.”
- “You’re being silly.”
- “You need to go back to class.”

Instead, respond calmly and reassuringly.

✓ **HELP THE CHILD FEEL SAFE**

Stay with the child and, where possible:

- Move them to a quiet, safe space
- Speak slowly and calmly
- Reassure them that you are there to help
- Reduce unnecessary noise, questions and demands
- Encourage slow, steady breathing without forcing it
- Give them time to recover
- Follow the school's procedures if there are concerns about their physical health or they require urgent medical assistance

The immediate priority is to help the child feel **safe, supported and listened to.**



BE PROFESSIONALLY CURIOUS

Once the child is calm, staff can gently explore what happened without interrogating them.

Appropriate open prompts might include:

- “Can you tell me what was happening just before you started feeling worried?”
- “Has this happened before?”
- “Is there anything that has been making you feel worried recently?”
- “Is there anything happening at school, at home or somewhere else that you would like to tell me about?”

Listen carefully. Do not promise confidentiality and do not ask leading questions.

What appears to be anxiety could be associated with many different experiences, including bullying, difficulties at home, bereavement, abuse, neglect, online experiences, academic pressures or other worries.

Anxiety itself does not mean that a child is experiencing abuse or neglect, but staff should remain alert to the possibility that something else may be contributing to the child's distress.

✓ **RECORD AND SHARE THE CONCERN**

Staff should record what happened accurately, including:

- What they observed
- What the child said, using their own words where possible
- What happened immediately beforehand
- How the child was supported
- Any previous changes or concerns
- Any action taken

Where there is a safeguarding concern, this should be passed to the DSL or deputy without delay, in accordance with the school's child protection procedures.

KCSIE 2026 is clear: safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, children need the right help at the right time, and staff should act immediately where they have a safeguarding concern.



LOOK FOR PATTERNS

One episode should not be viewed in isolation.

Consider:

- Has this happened before?
- Is the anxiety becoming more frequent or intense?
- Has attendance changed?
- Is the child avoiding particular lessons, people or situations?
- Have there been changes in behaviour, friendships or attainment?
- Are there repeated physical complaints such as headaches or stomach aches?
- Have other staff noticed anything?
- Has the child said anything that might indicate a wider safeguarding concern?

The DSL and relevant staff can consider the information alongside everything else known about the child.



✓ **CONSIDER THE RIGHT SUPPORT**

Not every episode of anxiety is a safeguarding concern.

However, repeated or significant anxiety should not simply be managed each time it occurs without considering why it is happening and what support the child may need.

Depending on the circumstances, this might involve:

- Appropriate pastoral or mental health support
- Working with parents or carers where appropriate
- Early intervention or targeted support
- Seeking advice from relevant health professionals
- Considering SEND needs
- Safeguarding action where there are concerns about abuse, neglect, exploitation or other harm



The Safeguarding Question

The teacher thinks:

“She’s calm now and says she feels better.
Do I really need to do anything else?”



The answer depends on the circumstances but **don't simply dismiss the episode because the child has calmed down**. Consider what happened, what is already known about the child and whether there may be a pattern or an underlying concern.

Staff do not need to **diagnose anxiety** or determine its cause. Their role is to **notice, listen, record, share concerns appropriately and help ensure the child receives the right support at the right time**.

Sometimes the most important safeguarding question isn't: **"How do we stop the anxiety attack?"**

It is: **"What might this child's anxiety be telling us?"**

Notice the signs. Stay calm. Listen. Record. Be curious. Act on concerns.

