

# Body mapping

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Body mapping is a child-friendly psychoeducation activity, commonly used in assisting children to better recognize and understand anxiety or anger. It is used to improve children's awareness of the physiological and cognitive aspects of emotions, to normalize these responses, and to reduce confusion or fear about these responses. It also helps to provide a rationale for emotion regulation strategies that may be taught later (for example, breathing, muscle relaxation or cognitive-change strategies). It is a component of many CBT programs, for example, the Cool Kids program (Rapee *et al.* 2006) and similar activities have been described in other books (e.g. Huebner 2005; Whitehouse and Pudney 1998). We describe here the way that we introduce and use body mapping, along with ideas and variations that we find helpful.

## MATERIALS

- » You will need some paper and markers.
- » You may like to photocopy the *Body mapping template* on page 104 or use a cardboard cut-out of a body (both are optional).

## PROCEDURE

Ask the child to draw an outline of their body on the paper (you can be drawing one yourself as a model) or use a cardboard cut-out or the template provided.

Ask the child to draw their face showing the feeling you are working on (worried/scared/angry).

Ask the child to write down the different feelings words they use for this emotion somewhere next to the body—what do they call this feeling (for example, worried, nervous, scared, stressed)?

Ask them to remember a recent time when they were feeling the emotion that you are working on. Ask them to remember what they felt in their body and to draw or write onto their picture the different sensations they recall. You may need to prompt them to consider different body sensations, particularly those that commonly occur when people are anxious/angry. For example, “Did you notice anything about your breathing?” “Did you notice anything in your tummy?” It can be helpful to model by example, describing some of what you feel when you experience that emotion.

Depending on the child's awareness and understanding of his/her bodily changes, you may need to include some physical activities to assist in their understanding. For example:

- To help them consider muscle tightness, you can both get up and alternate making your bodies into hard/tight objects (for example, “Let's be robots/traffic lights/brick walls”) then floppy/soft objects (“Let's be jellyfish/rag dolls/spaghetti”).

Alternate tight and floppy, and once they understand the idea, ask the child to make suggestions of what you can be next. Then talk with them about the difference between tight versus floppy muscles, and how their muscles feel when they are experiencing anxiety/anger versus feeling relaxed.

- To help them consider heart rate and breathing, you can bring their awareness to their breathing and heart beating while relaxed (if they can notice it!) then run on the spot for a minute or two and try again. If you have a stethoscope to use before and after, that can be helpful.

Ask the child to remember what they were thinking when they were experiencing the emotion. Prompt them to consider the type of thoughts they have when they feel this way. For example, worry thoughts often begin with “what if...,” and many people think “that’s not fair” when they are angry. Write the thoughts the child identifies with in thought bubbles next to the body.

Normalize the child’s experiences of the emotion, using this activity as an opportunity to educate them about physiological aspects of that emotion (“the system in our body that turns on when we feel worried/angry”) and the cognitive aspects (“how we start to think worry thoughts/angry thoughts”). Talk about how we can learn ways to calm down our bodies and our thoughts.

## **FOR PARENTS**

If a parent is present in the session, they can join in and complete their own body map. If not, time should be spent in session allowing the child to tell their parent about their body map, to reinforce their learning and enhance their parents’ understanding.

It is helpful if parents can reinforce this work at home when they notice their child is experiencing the emotion by saying, for example, “I can see that you are feeling worried. What are you noticing in your body right now? What thoughts are you noticing right now?”

## **DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This activity is appropriate and relevant for children of all ages, but should be adjusted to suit the child’s own language and own level of understanding of the concepts. For younger children, the activity can be made more fun and less abstract by completing it on the floor using an outline of the child’s body on a large piece of butcher’s paper, or having them stick colored stickers onto the relevant parts of their bodies. Younger children will generally need more examples of physiological changes to be provided by the therapist or parent, or by looking at a simple feelings book. They are also less likely to have insight into their thoughts, but a thought bubble with a simple relevant example provided by the parent or therapist is still helpful.

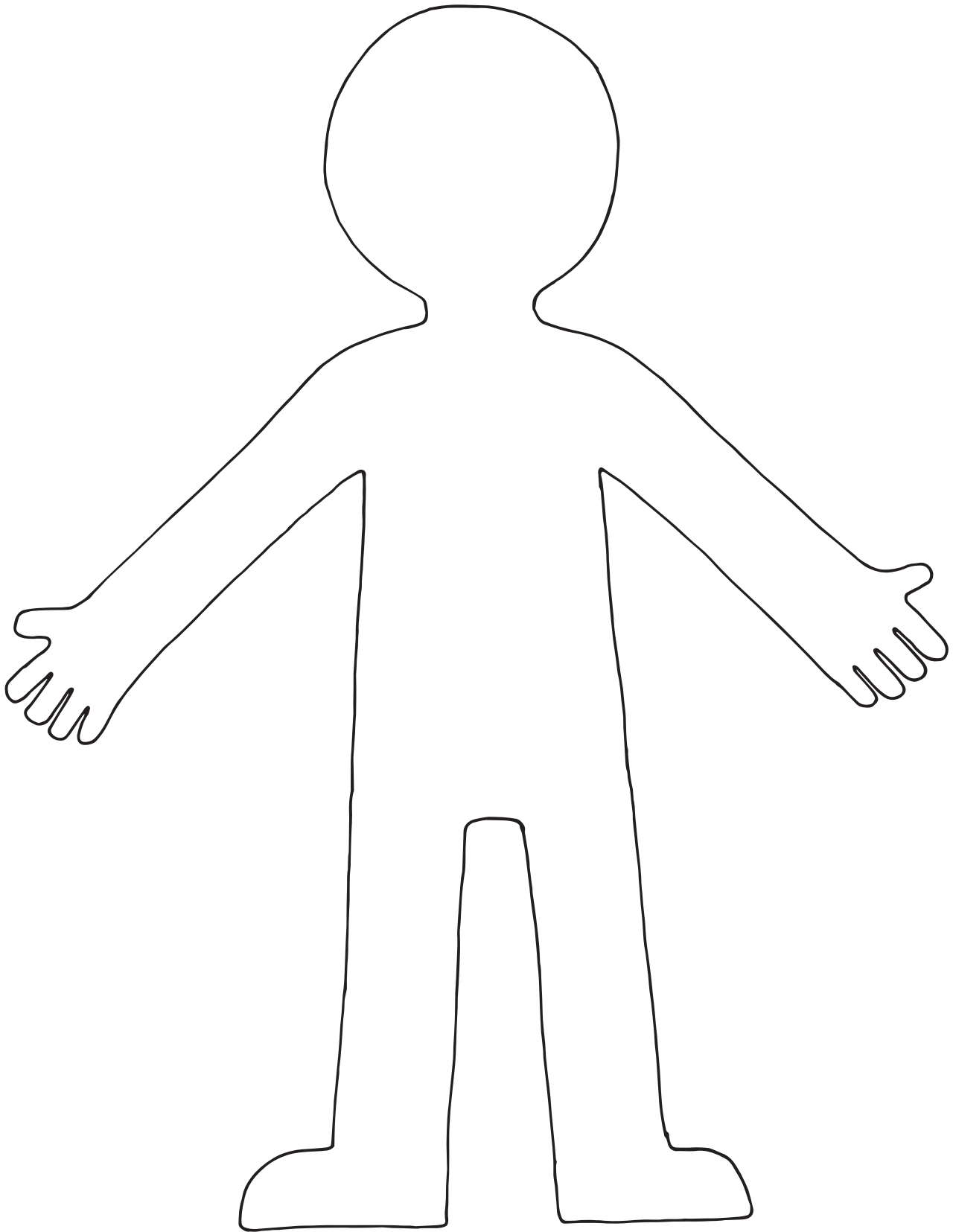
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## VARIATIONS

This activity can be made more appealing by using a cardboard cut-out of a body which the child can glue to paper, and/or colored paper (with the color chosen by the child to represent the emotion you are working on). Alternatively, it can be completed on a whiteboard then a photo printed or emailed for the child to take home.

## EXTENSION

Reading a book about the relevant emotion can help to reinforce these concepts as well as to further normalize the child's experiences of emotions. It may also help to provide some ideas if the child is feeling stuck and unsure of what changes occur for them. You can suggest that maybe they will notice one of these changes in their body the next time they are scared/angry.



**Body mapping template**