



ANXIETY IN CHILDREN

How Parents Can Help



Worried Parents, Worried Kids

Anxiety symptoms are very common in children and adolescents, with 10-20% of school-aged children experiencing anxiety. Seeing your child struggle with anxiety every day can be very difficult. You might even have anxiety yourself, making it even more challenging to help your child cope. While parents always do the best they can, sometimes they might (inadvertently) do things to maintain their child's fears and anxiety in the long-term.

What parents do that is **not** helpful

Following the Rules Some children with anxiety have set up their whole lives in such a way that they can avoid situations that cause anxiety. For example, an anxious child might dictate when and how to leave the house. Although it might seem helpful to assist your child in coping with their anxiety, what you are actually doing when you follow their rules is helping them to AVOID anxiety.

Keeping Your Child Out of Danger Because it can be troubling for parents to see their child feeling anxious, parents sometimes attempt to keep their child “out of danger” before they are even in an anxious situation. For example, you might pull your child out of a social situation as soon as they look even a bit uncomfortable. Once again, it is clear that parents are trying to help. But the message that they are actually sending when they do this is that anxiety is dangerous and needs to be avoided at all costs.

Pushing Too Much Sometimes parents will try to push their children into anxious situations before they are ready or without telling them first. Although trying to help your child face their fears is a good thing, when it is sprung on your child suddenly, it that can feel very scary and overwhelming. It is a bit like the old idea of learning how to swim by being thrown in a lake: this won't help you learn how to swim, it will only make you scared of water and probably distrusting of the person who pushed you. Parents who push too much are actually making the world a scary place for their child, and s/he is going to distrust you.

Reassuring Your Child This may work at first, but eventually children become dependent on reassurance; often seeking it excessively. After you reassure your child they feel good for a few moments. Then doubt creeps in and they are back for more. Reassurance barely works in the short term and definitely not in the long term.

REMEMBER:
Avoiding anxiety only works in the short-term. Facing fears is the only way to effectively manage it in the long-term.



REMEMBER:
Anxiety is uncomfortable and sometimes unpleasant, but it is not dangerous. It is a normal and necessary system in the body.

Ways parents can help

Be a Coach, Not a Protector Do not attempt to protect your child from anxiety, instead coach them through it. Although you are your child's coach, they have to do the heavy lifting.

Allow Them to Worry As you know, telling your children not to worry won't prevent them from doing so. If your children could simply shove their feelings away, they would. But allowing your children to worry openly, in limited doses, can be helpful. Create a daily ritual called "Worry Time" that lasts 10 to 15 minutes. During this ritual encourage your children to release all their worries in writing. You can make the activity fun by decorating a worry box. During worry time there are no rules on what constitutes a valid worry -- anything goes. When the time is up, close the box and say good-bye to the worries for the day.

Bring Your Child's Fear to Life Create a worry character (e.g., dragon, bully). Personifying worry has multiple benefits. It can help demystify the scary physical response children experience when they worry.

Normalize It is important to let your child know that he or she is not alone. Lots of children have problems with anxiety.

Relaxation Teach your child how to relax using deep breathing or mental imagery. Relaxation can help reduce "fight or flight," and physical discomfort (e.g., racing heart, shaking, hyperventilation) during anxiety.

Teach Your Child to Be a Thought

Detective You may have heard that teaching children to think more positively could calm their worries. But the best remedy for distorted thinking is not positive thinking; it's accurate thinking!

- **Catch your thoughts:** Imagine every thought you have floats above your head in a bubble. Now, catch one of the worried thoughts like "No one at school likes me."
- **Collect evidence:** Next, collect evidence to support or negate this thought. Teach your child that feelings are not facts.
- **Challenge your thoughts:** The best way to do this is to teach your children to have a debate within themselves or to "take their worry to court."

Face Fears Create a checklist with your child of the feared situation. Include all the steps needed to face the fear. Then encourage your child to start working through their checklist, starting with the smallest step.

Model Appropriate Coping

Behaviour Show your child that you too worry and that you too face your fears.

Empathize Use empathy instead of reassurance. Anxiety is scary. Your child wants to know that you get it.

Practice self-compassion You did not cause your child's anxiety, but you can help them overcome it. Love yourself. You are your child's champion! ♥

Adapted by Dr. Kate Aubrey from "Nine Things Every Parent with an Anxious Child Should Try." By Renee Jain, Huffington Post, October 2014.