

Anxiety: Strategies to Help Anxious Children

Children with anxiety can worsen as they grow by age. It is important to know how children can manage anxiety on their own.

Children with anxiety at a young age can have many effects. Parents often goes into “protective mode” which is quite normal. Parents many attempts to solve problems for the child, help avoid triggers or anxiety or try to engineer a worry-free lifestyle. Certain accommodation can help anxious children in the classroom, and it is a good idea to slow the daily pace to help decrease stress, parents cannot protect their kids from experiencing anxiety. What they can do is help children learn to manage anxiety with very minimal support.

Set Clear Expectations

It's important to have similar expectations for anxious children that you have for non-anxious children. However, it can also be helpful to proceed at a slower pace and make some accommodations. While your other kids likely want to attend every birthday party, your anxious child probably wants to avoid them all. In this situation, it may be helpful to attend small parties that don't include overwhelming triggers (bounce houses, loud music, lack of structure/supervision).

Setting clear expectations and helping your child create appropriate benchmarks to meet those expectations teaches your child that she/he can work through anxious feelings and manage their anxiety.

Let Your Child Worry

No child ever stopped worrying because a parent said, “Don't worry!”, or “Relax!”. In fact, worry serves an important function in our lives. Without some amount of worry, we wouldn't stop to consider actual dangers that do threaten us. Give your child uninterrupted time with you each day to vent worries and brainstorm solutions together.

Avoid Avoidance

Just like telling your child not to worry won't make those anxious thoughts disappear, avoiding triggers of anxiety won't help your child learn to cope. If your child becomes anxious around dogs, for example, crossing the street each time you encounter a dog or staying away from all dogs will only validate that anxious thought. It sends the message that all dogs are dangerous. It's better to desensitize your child to triggers of anxiety by taking small steps. Try looking at pictures of different breeds online and talking about what feelings they trigger. Next, watch dogs at play at a dog park from a safe distance. Finally, ask to visit with a calm, older dog of a friend or a therapy dog. By taking small steps, kids can learn to work through their fears and worries.

Practice Reframing

The anxious thought cycle is overwhelming because it causes feelings of helplessness. When anxiety spikes, children get caught in a cycle of "what ifs" and "I can't's." Anxious kids tend to engage in a variety of cognitive distortions such as black and white thinking and overgeneralizing. Carving out regular time to work on positive reframing empowers your anxious child to take control over his anxious thoughts. It works like this:

1. Name a worry floating around in your brain right now.
2. What is the worry telling you?
3. Let's break it down and see if that worry is 100% right.
4. How can we take that worry thought and change it to a positive thought?

For example, your child voices a fear that the kids in their class don't like them. Why do they think this? Because a boy in class laughed when they didn't know the answer, and now they are scared that their classmates think they are dumb. Help them break down the reality of their situation: "I answer questions in class every day. A friend always sits with me at lunch. I play with my friends at recess." Now reframe the situation: "It hurt my feelings when the boy laughed, but I have other good friends in my class."

Help Them Build a Coping Kit

If you want to empower your child to work through his worries, you have to help him learn a variety of coping skills. One thing that helps anxious kids is having a concrete list of strategies to use in a moment of anxiety. While some

can memorize a list of strategies, others might need to write them down. Try these:

- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Stress ball
- Write it out
- Talk back to worries and reframe thoughts
- Get help from an adult

Get Back to Basics

Your anxious child doesn't need to play every sport and attend every party, but he does need to slow down and focus on his basic health needs:

- Sleep
- Healthy meals
- Plenty of water
- Downtime to decompress
- Outdoor free play
- Daily exercise (think riding bikes, playing at the park, etc.)

Empathize Often

Anxiety can be paralyzing for young children. When kids feel completely overwhelmed by anxious thoughts, they struggle to do everyday things like attend school or go to soccer practice. Anxious children even avoid fun things like play dates and movies. It's important to empathize with your child. This normalizes what they experience and helps them understand that they aren't alone, and you will guide them through it.

Final tip: Take care of your own needs, too. Parenting an anxious child can be all-consuming. Between interrupted sleep and constant worries, child anxiety can take a toll on the caregivers. Make sure to prioritize your own health needs so that you have the energy you need to help your child through this difficult time.