



# Center for Anxiety *and* Behavior Management

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## Anxiety in Children: *How Adults Can Help*



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It is estimated that 1 in 8 children are affected by anxiety disorders and that, if left untreated, these children are more likely to have academic failures, social struggles, and substance abuse (ADAA.org). The good news is that anxiety can be prevented and easily treated. What complicates child anxiety prevention and treatment is that parents of anxious children often struggle with their own anxiety.

Instinct often guides parents on how to help their anxious children, but many parents are surprised to learn that some of their very loving and well-intended behaviors are actually causing and/or maintaining their children's anxiety. Strategies that calm a child down may help in the short term but could actually be keeping the child anxious in the long term.

There are many strategies that parents can use to help prevent their anxiety-prone children from developing an anxiety disorder. If a child has already developed a significant amount of anxiety, parents can still use these strategies to help reduce their children's worried thoughts, intense emotional reactions, and bothersome behaviors.

### EARLY SIGNS OF CHILD ANXIETY:

- Many fears and phobias
- Frequently asking, "What if...?" questions
- Avoidance of social situations (shyness)
- Perfectionism (fear of making even small mistakes)
- Frequently seeking reassurance
- Headaches, stomachaches, and other physical symptoms with no medical explanations
- Emotional reactions when separating from caregivers
- Having rigid routines
- Avoidance of unfamiliar people or situations

## WHEN IS ANXIETY "BAD"?

Anxiety is a normal human emotion, but when it causes significant amounts of distress and/or gets in the way of a child's social, academic, or other area of development, it's considered clinically significant.

Examples of *significant distress* include:

- physical symptoms
- frequently asking for reassurance
- crying at bedtime or the morning of going to school or another feared event
- difficulty falling or staying asleep
- extreme irritability
- screaming, yelling, and crying



Examples of *impairment* include:

- Academic difficulties
- Failure to make or keep friends
- Refusal to go anywhere without caregivers
- Avoiding new people, places, and experiences
- School refusal
- Refusing to engage in activities in which he or she might not perform perfectly

# 10 Parenting Strategies for Helping Anxious Children:

**Have realistic expectations.** Every child has different strengths and weaknesses, so it makes sense to have individual expectations for different children. Just because one of your children is easily able to join a group of friends does not mean that it's easy for your other child. Set your child up for success. Start with attainable goals.

**Validate feelings.** A large part of the battle might be your child feeling misunderstood. Let him or her know that you understand that the situation is scary and that even **you** have situations that scare you! Let him or her know that it's normal to have all kinds of feelings (anxiety, sadness, anger, etc.).

**Pay attention to and praise bravery.** Think of your attention as your child's paycheck. Children love adult attention, especially from parents. Remember that you are asking your child to engage in situations that are perceived to be scary, so your attention and praise can go a long way in motivating your child to be brave.

**Avoid safety behaviors, and let your child try things on his or her own.** One of the hardest tasks in parenting is watching your child struggle. However, you want your child to learn that the situation is not threatening and that your child has the ability to cope with difficult situations. If you frequently save your child from anxiety-provoking experiences, he or she will learn that (a) the situation was, in fact, a threat and required parental intervention and (b) he or she is not capable of dealing with his or her own struggles. When children think that their world is threatening and that they can't cope, this is a "breeding ground" for anxiety.

**Model appropriate coping strategies.** Children with anxiety often have parents with anxiety. If your words or actions demonstrate that the world is a scary place, your child is likely to be anxious. Keep your fears to yourself and verbalize positive or even neutral explanations for your anxiety trigger. If you forgot to pay a bill, instead of verbalizing all of the possible negative consequences, say aloud in a non-emotional way that you will pay the bill and might get a late fee. This gives your child a message that the worst likely outcome is not so threatening and is manageable.

**Give anxiety a name.**

By calling your child's anxiety a "worry bully" or even "The Big Bad Wolf", you separate the worry from your child. It helps children to understand that there is nothing wrong with *them* and increases their feelings of being in control. Naming the anxiety gives you and your child a common enemy to fight.

**Teach detective thinking.** Anxious children often overestimate the likelihood of a threat and underestimate their abilities to cope with that threat. It's not always helpful to teach children to "think positively" because those thoughts might not be accurate. Realistic thinking is the goal. By (a) identifying the worried thought, (b) using detective work to gather evidence for and against the worried thought, and (c) coming up with a more realistic thought, your child will learn how to accurately perceive his or her world which should lead to less anxiety.

**Teach relaxation.** Deep breathing, which involves slowly breathing in and slowly breathing out, stops the body's fight or flight response when it perceives itself to be in danger. Relaxation can also involve tensing and relaxing major muscles groups (legs, arms, hands, etc.). Having a child imagine a safe and calm place is another way to induce relaxation.

**Expose the child to the feared situation.** The paradox of anxiety management is that children have to face the fears that they've been avoiding. The strongest and most long-lasting learning comes from direct experience. Identify your child's worry, make a list of steps that approximate the worry, and then encourage your child to bravely complete each step.

**Remain consistent.** One of the most important parenting principles is remaining consistent. If one parent encourages bravery and the other parent engages in safety behaviors, the child will be confused! Similarly, if you encourage bravery one day but allow your child to avoid a feared situation the next day, your child will not learn how to properly cope with anxiety. It is important for children to receive the same message from parents, teachers, and other caregivers that the feared event is not dangerous and that the child is capable of handling difficulties.