

What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious



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When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning parents, not wanting a child to suffer, can actually make the youngster's anxiety worse. It happens when parents try to protect kids from their fears. Here are pointers for helping children escape the cycle of anxiety.

1. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.

None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety isn't to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It's to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they're anxious. And as a byproduct of that, the anxiety will decrease over time.

2. Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious.

Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. Let's say a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset and starts to cry — not to be manipulative, but just because that's how they feel. If their parents whisk them out of there, or remove the thing they're afraid of, the child has learned that coping mechanism. And that cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

3. Express positive — but realistic — expectations.

You can't promise a child that their fears are unrealistic — that they won't fail a test, that they'll have fun ice skating, or that another child won't laugh at them during show and tell. But you can express confidence that they're going to be okay, that they will be able to manage it. And you can let them know that as they face those fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives them confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you're not going to ask them to do something they can't handle.

4. Respect their feelings, but don't empower them.

It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. So if a child is terrified about going to the doctor because they're due for a shot, you don't want to belittle those fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic, help them understand what they're anxious about, and encourage them to feel that they can face their fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

5. Don't ask leading questions.

Encourage your child to talk about their feelings, but try not to ask leading questions — "Are you worried about the science fair?" To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: "How are you feeling about the science fair?"

6. Don't reinforce the child's fears.

What you don't want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: "Maybe this *is* something that you should be afraid of." Let's say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time they're around a dog, you might be anxious about how they will respond, and you might unintentionally send a message that they should, indeed, be worried.

7. Encourage the child to tolerate their anxiety.

Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what they want or need to do. It's really encouraging them to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the "habituation curve." That means that it will drop over time as they continue to have contact with the stressor. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that's how we get over our fears.

8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.

When we're afraid of something, the hardest time is really before we do it. So another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory period. If a child is nervous about going to a doctor's appointment, you don't want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go; that's likely to get your child more keyed up.

9. Think things through with the child.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true — how would they handle it? A child who's anxious about separating from their parents might worry about what would happen if a parent didn't come to pick them up. So we talk about that. If your mom doesn't come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? "I would tell the coach my mom's not here." And what do you think the coach would do? "Well, he would call my mom. Or he would wait with me." For some kids, having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

You can help kids handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Kids are perceptive, and they're going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you can't handle the stress or the anxiety. I'm not saying to pretend that you don't have stress and anxiety, but let kids hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.



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