

10 Tips for Parents: When Children Are Anxious

How to Respect Feelings without Empowering Fears

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 them 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 or fall away 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. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset, starts to cry—not to be manipulative, but just because that's how they feel—and her parents whisk him/her out of there, or remove the thing she's afraid of, she/he 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 & tell. But you can express confidence that they are going to be okay, they will be able to manage it, and that, as they face their 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 an injection, you don't want to belittle the 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 her 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 anxious about the big test? 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 say, 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 to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the "habituation curve"—it will drop over time as the child continues 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. So just try to shorten that period to a minimum.

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 s/he handle it? A child who's anxious about separating from their parents might worry about what would happen if they didn't come to pick her up. So we talk about that. If your mum doesn't come at the end of practice, what would you do? "Well I would tell the teacher my mum's not here." And what do you think the teacher would do? "Well he would call my mum. Or he would wait with me." A child who's afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick them up can have a code word from their parents that anyone they sent would know. For some children, having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety

There are multiple ways you can help children handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Children 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 children hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.