

Don't Worry!

When your child is angry, have you ever tried telling them to just “calm down.”

I bet it worked! I'm entirely confident that they smiled at you angelically and said something like “thank you for your wisdom! You are right, I do just need to calm down.”

Just kidding!

In fact, if they're anything like my own kids, they may have yelled back “I don't want to calm down!” before storming off to their room and slamming the door behind them.

When it comes to dealing with big emotions like anger, it never helps to tell our children to just “calm down.” Yet anger isn't the only emotion that we try to dismiss.

How often have we prepared our kid for their first day at a new school, for their first date, or for an exam and said something like “Don't worry! You'll do fine!”

We might believe that we're being reassuring. After all, these words are coming from a place of kindness and compassion. Yet they are unlikely to do anything to address the worries and anxieties our kids are experiencing.

The difference between anger and worry is that worry is often a hidden emotion. We may say “don't worry,” and unlike saying “calm down,” it might seem to work. Our child may smile back at us as they walk into school or their exam. They might even seem less nervous the next time. Yet on the inside, they're thinking something like “my parent doesn't understand me... I can't talk to my parent about my worries... I don't have anyone to help me...”

So if saying “don't worry” doesn't cut it, what should we be doing instead?

1. Be proactive

Often the biggest worry kids have is the fear of the unknown. We can greatly diminish the anxiety our kids are likely to feel by talking to them about what to expect. If they're starting at a new school, that could mean looking together at the layout of the school, going over their class timetable together, and talking to them about how they will get

to and from school. If they're preparing for an exam, studying just addresses part of the worry. You can also help them locate their designated seat number, plan how early they want to arrive, or encourage them to talk to someone who did well on that exam last year. Whenever there is a big event on the horizon, it really pays to help our kids visualise what that event will look like.

2. Provide emotional support in the moment

If it looks like your child is getting nervous, telling them not to worry only invalidates their feelings. Instead, you can say something like, "it looks like you're feeling a bit worried about something, would you like to talk to me about it?" Then wait. Silence is a powerful form of communication; it tells our kids that we're listening. Make sure not to jump in and try to solve their problems when they do start talking. Just listen and provide a sounding board as they work their way to their own solutions.

3. Help them address persistent worry

Some kids are more prone to anxiety than others. Importantly, worry and anxiety does not always look like worry and anxiety. It can often present as frequent stomach aches, trouble sleeping, or irritability. If you're not sure what is driving your child's behaviour, but there have been recent changes in your child's life or a big event coming up, worry may be part of the problem. It can be useful to talk to them in age-appropriate terms about the purpose of worry – that worry is like a messenger telling us that something might go wrong, and we can use our worry to help us make good choices and stay safe. Books like *The Worrysaurus* by Rachel Bright and *What If?* by Lynn Jenkins can also serve as a springboard for discussion.

Worry is just like any other emotion. We can't stop our kids from feeling it by telling them to just calm down, relax, or get over it. Like with all emotions, the best thing we can do is to be patient and support our kids as the emotion runs its course.



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