

# Helping your anxious child



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## Reassure that feeling anxious is normal

- Let your child know that it is normal to have fears and worries from time to time and that you also get worried at times.
- Remind your child that anxiety is not dangerous – it is just a feeling that people have and a normal response.
- Explain and role model that you can relax and calm yourself down when anxious through using calming strategies, talking to someone or finding something fun/interesting to do.



## Give emotional support through reflective listening

- Children need at least one person in their life that truly understands how they are feeling. Giving emotional support starts with effective listening where we truly hear and understand how a situation is, how they are feeling and how it is impacting on them. Often we are quick to step in and offer solutions to help comfort but what they really need is to know that you understand. Research shows that even just helping children to label an emotion is enough to lessen the stress response and decrease anxiety.
- So how do you do reflective listening? When your child talks to you about something, truly listen to what they are saying without jumping in with advice, comments, solutions and judgements and emotional reactions. Keep your own perception around the issue separate and just hear what they are saying and listen out for the emotion they are expressing. Keeping your own emotions in check is also important, as this is about the child and their feelings. Reflect back what they have said but summarising the content and the emotion e.g. 'so you had a really tough day today and you felt really hurt by your friends.' Children will soon let you know if this summary is in the ballpark of how they are feeling and what happened. Don't worry about getting it all right, it's the intent that counts. Children know when parents are really listening and trying to understand their situation.
- Once you reflect back how they felt and what happened, then they will most likely share more of what they feel and what happened. This can be a real challenge for parents, as it's so easy to fall into the trap of problem solving for children to ease their pain however to ease emotional suffering, children need to first express their feelings in the arms of someone who cares. Once all feelings are expressed, then it's time to help children solve the problem (if there is something to be solved) and this can be done by encourage them to develop effective problem-solving skills to build their resilience.



## Encourage your child to share feelings and worries

- Chat regularly one on one– this can be about anything including their worries.
- If you can notice that your child is really worried but they don't know how they are feeling, you can help them to share what they are feeling by saying something like "I noticed you seem really worried at the moment". This opens up lines of communication.
- You can also ask what is worrying them the most if they are appearing anxious.
- Once your child shares how they are feeling, use the 'reflecting listening' technique explained above, where you basically just reflect back to your child what they have said in a summary form capturing content and emotion.

## Help to problem solve instead of giving too much reassurance

- Once you have listened using reflective listening, you can help them to problem solve for the next step. This helps children to learn a lifelong skill and an effective coping strategy for anxiety or worrying.
- Ask them 'what could you do?' 'How do you think you could..?' 'I wonder what would happen if you?'
- Help your child to make a plan of what they could do to solve a problem.
- If there is nothing they can specifically do to solve a problem (such as just generally worrying) then using a coping strategy such as finding something fun to do or calming exercise.
- Give lots of positive praise for trying to solve a problem and give them a chance to try out solutions on their own.
- If we step in and solve a problem for them by taking over and doing things for them, we are robbing them of the essential practice needed to develop their emotional resilience. Every time they solve a problem on their own (with guidance from you if needed), their confidence and self-mastery builds. This helps to immunise them against anxiety in the future as they form a belief that they can handle tricky situations on their own.

## Help your child to recognise anxious thoughts

- Teach kids that they have thoughts all the time and some are helpful and some are not. Just because we have a thought about something (or worried about something) it does not mean that it will come true or that there is truth in the thought.
- Remind them that everyone has 'self-talk' and that we all have ways of thinking that at times isn't helpful. These are 'just thoughts'. We don't need to try to change our thoughts, or stop thinking about something (as this often makes it worse and it's really hard to do), just become aware of what our mind is thinking, so we can then choose to think in more helpful ways.
- Depending on your child's age, it can be really helpful to teach children to notice thoughts that are unhelpful. As a parent you can help your child to reframe how they perceive a situation by helping them to see that they may have unhelpful thoughts that don't make them feel good. It is important to help them to discuss more helpful ways of looking at a situation, once they have received emotional support first so they feel heard and understood.



## Encourage children to face fears in small steps

- Children naturally will want to avoid what they are worried about which is a normal reaction when our 'flight and fight' system is activated as it helps to keep us safe. However as anxious thoughts are usually not realistic or helpful thoughts, the flight or fight system can be activated when it doesn't need to be which means our job as parents is to help children to face fears in small steps and not encourage avoidant behaviour.
- If we help our child to avoid a situation they are worried about, then we reinforce the anxious behaviour and reactions by teaching children that what they are worried about is actually real.
- It is so important that children still face their fears even though they may be worried about something. E.g. if they are worried about going to school because something bad happened the day before, it is essential that they still go to school with lots of emotional support and encouragement. Keeping kids at home or avoid situations they are worried about only reinforces that their fear is real and something they need to stay scared of.
- Let them know you understand how they are feeling and set aside a time to make a plan to face fears in small steps rather than avoiding it completely. Set goals and praise brave behaviours once they have a go at facing their fear bit by bit.



## Encourage healthy risk taking

- Risk taking in day to day life is essential for building resilience and lessening anxiety. It teaches children that even though they may be worried about doing something new or difficult, they can still have a go and things will be ok. This then builds confidence and makes the world an exciting place instead of a scary one.
- If we don't encourage risk taking we give a clear message that the world is scary and that they won't be able to cope if something new is thrown their way.
- Getting used to making mistakes is an essential part of risk taking. Without making mistakes we are not trying anything new or stretching ourselves to see what we are capable of.
- Role modelling risk taking is important also. Share how you make mistakes all the time and that this is a part of learning something new and part of just being human.

## Encourage independence

- Independence and confidence go hand in hand. It is almost impossible for children to feel confident in their lives if they are not able to manage their daily tasks. Daily tasks that build confidence can be as simple as getting dressed on their own, helping to cook a meal, getting things ready for the next day or walking into the classroom on their own. Every time a child is given a chance to be independent, they are given a beautiful gift of being trusted by their parent. This gives a clear message that they have the skills to be able to manage their own lives. This in turn helps lessens their anxiety as they are given the trust and the opportunity to use their own capabilities. Children can often surprise us with their ability to be masters of their own lives.

## Teach your child to recognise how anxiety feels in their body

- Help them to identify where anxiety feels in their own body such as a jumpy tummy, feeling sick, heart racing, feeling dizzy etc. Share how anxiety feels in your body as well (to help normalise anxious feelings). Explain that this is the body's way of letting them know there is danger so they can keep themselves safe.
- You can explain the body's reaction like a smoke alarm going off in the house when there is fire. When we get worried an alarm system like a 'smoke alarm' goes off in our brain. Our bodies respond by having a racing heart, feeling a bit sick, dizzy, muscles tense up etc. This is really normal and helps to protect us.
- If children are old enough you can explain in these more scientific details: the smoke alarm is the part of the brain called the amygdala. When this is activated, this fires off the adrenal glands which then fires off the body's response to prepare for danger – this is why we get the body reactions.
- It is important to explain that sometimes the smoke alarm goes off when it doesn't need to. This is when we worry about something that is not dangerous to us (even though it feels like it is). Our bodies are still reacting to this danger even though it is not real. We can however calm down our bodies and stop the smoke alarm by calming ourselves down with a range of helpful strategies such as practicing Mindfulness exercises.
- Our pre-frontal cortex which is what we call our 'noticing' or 'thinking' brain has the ability to switch off the smoke alarm (amygdala). Noticing in a particular way helps us to turn off our smoke alarm. That's why we bring in our awareness to what is happening, rather than trying to fight what is happening or run away from it. Our awareness alone turns off the smoke alarm. If we try to problem solve by running away or fighting the response, then this will just generate thoughts and feelings which makes us dwell on things and reflect on things. This just reinforces and strengthens the response. Just by noticing our body's reaction, helps this whole process to switch off without 'trying' to switch things off.
- Link this body recognition with using calming strategies so children can see the link between anxious thoughts and physical symptoms and that they have control to calm their body and also their mind when anxious.
- After using calming strategies or exercise, discuss how they feel in their body and see if they notice a difference before and after using the strategies. This helps them to see the value in using the calming techniques and empowers them to have control of their mind and body when anxious. It teaches them that anxiety can lessen by managing it themselves.
- We can also help our children become more comfortable with feeling all emotions. It doesn't mean we have to like feeling a certain way, but the more we can tune into how we are feeling in our body, then the less likely we are to be afraid of how we are feeling. We would never push a child to explain how they are feeling, or push them to connect to a feeling if that doesn't feel right, but we can encourage our children to notice how emotions feel in our body and that it is ok to feel range of emotions.



## Teach relaxation and calming strategies

- Learning how to relax and calm yourself down is so important for children with anxiety. As a parent you can role model and directly teach children how to calm themselves down when they feel anxious by using the following techniques:
- Breathing technique: Take in a deep breath through your nose and then imagine you are blowing out a candle or blowing big bubbles that float away. Breathe out through your mouth. Continue to do this for a few minutes, deliberately slowing down the breaths each time.
- Mindfulness muscle relaxation - 'Tense and Relax' technique. Closing your eyes, tense and then relax each part of your body starting with your toes. E.g. tense up all the muscles in your toes by 'scrunching' them up as tight as you can. Then relax the toes by letting them 'flop'. Then move up to your feet, ankles, lower legs etc and continue up to your face and head. Take time to tense and then relax each area.
- Finding something fun or relaxing to do. Encourage your child to do an activity that is naturally relaxing for them. This will be an activity that puts them in the 'flow'. Flow activities are activities where you lose track of time and are fully engaged. Flow activities are usually things we are good at or are drawn towards. Each child will be different with their flow activities and it is easy to pick what they are – just watch your child and take note of when they are fully engaged in an activity.

## Practice Mindfulness Exercises every day

- Learn how to use Mindfulness meditation exercises and practice them each day. Research shows that mindfulness meditation actually changes the structure of the brain and is one of the most powerful ways to lessen anxiety. Even just 5 – 10 minutes each day will make an enormous difference.

## Teach Mindful Belly Breathing technique

- Teach children a simple exercise that will help them to calm down immediately. Explain the process:
  - Focus just on your belly while you breathe (just focusing on this area is also calming in itself)
  - When you breathe in, your belly should rise up and when you breathe out your belly should fall.
  - Slow the breathing down so you can count in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 breathing in through your nose and then out slowly through your mouth and notice the belly rise and fall each time.
  - Repeat 3 times



## Have chill out time each day

- As well as learning how to relax when there is anxiety present, it is important to also keep anxiety and stress levels low by factoring in time each day to just chill out. As children are often overscheduled and overstimulated through technology, it is vital that there is time to just 'be' each day. This can be by playing with a favourite toy, building something, creating art work, playing with animals, playing a board game, drawing, making cubbies in the garden – the list is endless.
- Point your child in the direction of an activity that makes them feel good when they are also feeling anxious. An activity that is unstructured and free helps children to engage the creative part of their brain which in turn lessens anxiety. If children are used to spending chill out time each day, then it will be familiar to them if they need to calm down when anxious. If they spend a lot of time on technology and little time with creative play, it will be harder to direct them to creative activities when they are feeling stressed.
- It is important to note that chill out time is not time on technology. Although this may appear to be an activity that is relaxing, it is not effective for lessening anxiety or to wind down the brain after a full day of learning at school or after stressful events. Technology at night can also keep children wired up for hours which can affect sleeping patterns.



## Regular fun exercise

- There is nothing better than exercise to beat anxiety. Using your physical body allows the stress build up to be released and in turn our mental state is altered significantly. Even just a gentle walk for 30 minutes with your child will help to reduce their anxiety significantly. Walking and talking is a great way to connect, share feelings, problem solve and role model a fantastic coping strategy when things get tough.

## Use humour

- If appropriate use humour to 'break' the anxiety by trying to laugh at what has happened or about a worry. Humour and laughter is a great antidote to stress and anxiety.
- It is also vital to keep humour alive on a day to day basis at home as this teaches children to have a more easy going attitude towards life.

## Role model calm behaviour

- Role modelling calm and relaxed behaviour is important because children watch how you deal with life on a day to day basis. If you get anxious easily then your child will learn how to react to minor upsets in life.
- If your child is anxious, it is also important not to get worried about their anxious behaviour as this will also be 'catchy'. Children look to parents to role model an easy going approach to life.

## Set healthy boundaries

- Having healthy boundaries and setting consequences actually lessens anxiety. Not putting into place consequences because a child is anxious actually creates more anxiety. Although this may seem counter-intuitive, children actually need boundaries to feel safe and calm. Knowing what is expected in the home and having healthy limits set at home lets children know that you are in charge, strong and able to take care of the family.
- Allowing children to have too much control or too many choices gives them a message that you are not in charge of the family which is very anxiety provoking for them. Although they may complain and still try to get what they want (very normal behaviour!) they actually need parents to be in control of adult decisions and to set healthy limits.
- Hearing yourself say 'NO' regularly means we are on the right track with our kids. They may not like hearing this word but it is our job to be in charge but also considering our children's needs. Children will always push the boundaries and that is their job. Our job as parents is to set the boundaries and be consistent with them.

## Give just as much attention to positive behaviours

- Although children need lots of emotional support when anxious such as using the reflective listening technique and helping them to use calming strategies, it is also important to give more of your attention to the times when they are having a go at something new, using a positive attitude, sharing that they are anxious but still having a go at what they are afraid of, having a go at using calming strategies, taking time out to relax, reacting calmly and so on.
- If we give more of our attention to the behaviours that are positive, then these behaviours will continue. If we only give our one on one attention to children when they are anxious, they will surely continue with anxious behaviour as they are getting a payoff for it. Although this is not at all deliberate by children, they just quickly learn that they get emotional closeness with an adult only when they are feeling anxious.
- Give lots of praise when children are trying to face their fears and when they are taking healthy risks. Give lots of praise when they have soldered on in spite of being worried about something. Let them know how you understand how difficult it was for them, but they still did it.

## Nourish yourself

- Having time out regularly as a parent is really important as you will then be able to manage the job of parenting in a calmer and happier way. Having time out gives time for putting things into perspective and to reflect on how we are reacting to anxious children.
- Keep stress levels low around the home. If the home environment is calm, then children have a better chance of being able to chill out and be in the flow at home. The home is where children learn how to manage their day to day lives and if it is filled with stress and upheaval they will most likely be anxious.
- Remember: anxious is very catchy – anxious parents can create anxious kids. If you have anxiety yourself, then seek professional help yourself.

