



**Psych<sup>4</sup>Schools**

For

**parents:**

**Assist your child with stress  
and worry**

# For parents: Assist your child with stress and worry



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Children cope best with worries when they are reassured, informed, see challenging tasks as achievable and understand that success usually involves sustained effort.

## 1. Help resolve worries through supportive talking

- **Take worries and fears seriously.** Short conversations with your child about their worries can often dissipate concerns.

Listen to your child's concerns, name them and validate the feeling. For example, *'It sounds like you might be nervous about sleeping over at Holly's. That makes sense, doing new things can sometimes be a bit scary'*.

Supportive talking helps your child to feel understood, increases their emotional vocabulary, and normalises the experience. If their worries seem out of perspective see [Help your child to put worries into perspective](#) on page 6.

Only after talking about the feeling, when your child feels calmer, should you move into problem solving mode.

- **Have regular chats** while doing things together to give your child opportunities to raise any worries. Regular discussions can help to prevent excessive, escalating or ongoing worry.
  - **Eat meals regularly as a family** sharing thoughts and feelings about a range of topics. Turn off TVs, and other devices including phones (adults too). This means no answering texts or phone calls during family meal times.
  - **Use side-by-side communication** when walking or travelling by car. It can be less confronting to talk when you are not directly looking at one another. Vehicles can be good places to do this, as you are both strapped in and no one can walk away!
  - **Do chores together**, such as washing dishes, walking the dog, folding clothes, raking leaves, painting. These are all opportunities for a child to raise issues.
- **Build a village around your child.** From an early age, connect your child with extended family and other trusted adults. Although peer support is usually readily available, guidance from mature adults can often provide more accurate and realistic advice.
- **Be aware of what you say.** Anxious communication such as, 'Be careful crossing the road' can make you and the child feel panicky. Instead, be assertive, specifying the behaviour you wish to see. For example, 'Remember, stop and look both ways before crossing the road'. See the CardioSmart website for tips on [reducing stress by being assertive](#).
- **Be the parent.** Avoid turning to your child for their emotional support or friendship. If your child sees you stressed, reassure them that you are sorting things out.

### Talk with your child

- **Acknowledge worries.** A child's worries are often very real to them. Don't dismiss worries by saying for example, 'Don't be silly there's no such thing as monsters.'
- **Don't label your child** for example 'shy', 'worry-wart' or 'stress head.' Labels reinforce the behaviour making it more prevalent.
- **Listen first, rather than 'fixing' the situation.** Help your child to recognise and name the feeling. Show compassion and understanding. Help your child to solve the problem only after these steps.



### 2. Encourage your child to face challenges and fears

Children need opportunities to learn to solve problems and cope with risks, disappointment and failure, in order to become capable, resilient and independent.

- **Don't rush to help.** The children of parents who jump in and help with small issues are more likely to develop anxiety.<sup>1</sup> You may need to stand back and let your child struggle a little before helping. This can be difficult as the natural instinct is to jump in and solve the issue for them or let them avoid whatever is worrying them, such as meeting new people.
  - **Encourage independence.** Expect your child to do age appropriate things for themselves. For example, a young child can carry their bag, make their own sandwich, and put away belongings. Give an adolescent personal space as long as they keep safe, you know where they are, and they follow agreed rules and expectations.
  - **Focus on 'having-a-go' and being brave.** Prompt your child to overcome fears by facing them, with support from you. This may involve talking it through, encouraging, doing one small step for them and they do the rest, but it doesn't mean taking over and solving the problem, or allowing your child to avoid the situation.
  - **Show (not just tell) your child how you cope with problems,** by letting them see you working out a solution to a problem, or calming down and relaxing before 'having-a go'. When appropriate, talk your child through what it is like for you, and how you cope using proactive strategies such as deep breathing. For examples of ways adults cope proactively, see Psych4Schools, *For parents: Reduce your stress or worry* available from Psych4Schools, your Psych4Schools school or teacher subscriber.
  - **Don't set unrealistic expectations or be overly critical.** This can increase anxiety, especially if your child feels they cannot meet your expectations. Instead, set high but achievable goals that allow room for mistakes and improvement. Explain that mistakes are often how we learn. Interestingly, children, whose parents accept mistakes, are less likely to actually make mistakes than those whose parents set perfectionistic goals.<sup>2</sup>
  - **Help your child to confront their fears using small steps.** This can be done through gradual repeated exposure to the thing they fear. For example, if they are afraid of dogs, the first step might be looking at photos of dogs, then going to a park where dogs play, then visiting a friend with a small gentle dog, and so on until your child can calmly pat and play with a dog for an extended period of time. Have your child practice relaxing through deep breathing when performing each step. It is normal to feel a little bit scared at each new step, although the child should not feel panicky or overwhelmed. For more on this read the *Centre for Clinical Interventions Situation Stepladder guide*, or watch *Redesign My Brain With Todd Sampson*, Series 2 Episode 3 *Make Me Brave*, with your child.



<sup>1</sup> Hudson, J (2014). Let our children play in the mud: Jen Hudson at TEDxMacquarieUniversity, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmJDHdicMiY>

<sup>2</sup> ibid

For parents:

## Assist your child with stress and worry



### 3. Build your child's belief in their ability to solve problems (self-efficacy)

Children with high levels of confidence in their capabilities usually approach difficult tasks as challenges to master rather than threats to avoid.<sup>3</sup>

- **Emphasise that success usually requires sustained effort** and often multiple attempts. It may be useful to use the analogy of losing 'lives' when playing a computer game, or reminding them most people fall off many times when learning to ride a bike. Clips such as the Nike Commercial *Michael Jordan 'Failure'* YouTube clip could serve as a discussion starter.
- **Focus on solutions.** First, talk with your child about how they feel. Listen and empathise with their concerns. Identify what it is that is worrying them. Once this has been done you can move to helping them to solve the problem. Brainstorm solutions together, rather than telling your child what to do. What is the actual problem? What are possible solutions? Which is the best one to try? To work, solutions need to be realistic and agreed to by your child. Is this achievable? What is the likelihood it will work?
- **Break a problem into parts.** Sometimes problems seem large and overwhelming. Help your child to deal with a problem by breaking it into steps. Ask, 'What can you do to solve this problem or feel better about it? Let's break it into small steps' 'What is one thing we could do first?'
- **Write a storyboard or an action plan.** Once you have helped your child to break a problem into parts, create a step-by-step action plan outlining how to solve each step. If the child still does not think the task is achievable break the solution into even smaller steps, or offer support with one or two steps.
- **When the situation is out of your child's control, find something they can do.** For example, if worried about a terminally ill grandparent, talk about things your child can do now. They cannot prevent the death, but they can spend time with the grandparent, share a short poem, play music, read, create art or take a favourite treat for each visit.
- **Teach specific strategies to help your child deal with worries.** For example, when dealing with teasing, you might say, 'What do you think might be going on?' Help your child to explore what is happening. Siblings might help to brainstorm ideas. Alternatively, if discussion and brainstorming is unsuccessful, you might say, 'Maybe they are jealous. Just look puzzled and walk away' or 'It might be good to not react and see how it goes' or 'If it keeps happening tell your teacher or homeroom coordinator and ask for help.'
- **Don't tolerate bullying.** Bullied children are up to three times more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression than their peers.<sup>4</sup> For some children, anxiety and depression will resolve itself when bullying stops. For others, residual worry, anxiety or depression can persist. For these children, intervention by teachers and other professionals is needed to help reduce the harm and feelings of isolation, distress and anger that can result from being bullied.



<sup>3</sup> Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachandran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 71-81). New York: Academic Press. (Reprinted in H. Friedman [Ed.], *Encyclopedia of mental health*. San Diego: Academic Press, 1998) See, <http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Bandura/BanEncy.html>

<sup>4</sup> Rigby, K. (1998). The relationship between reported health and involvement in bully/victim problems among male and female secondary school students. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 3(4), 465 - 476.



## 4. Help your child to put worries into perspective

- **Focus on self-talk.** What we think or say to ourselves directly influences how we feel. When we worry we are focused on the negatives and expect the worst outcome. The following strategies may help your child to put situations into perspective.
  - **Play detective.** For example, if your child says 'I'm going to fail tomorrow's test' ask, 'Is this really true?' It can help to list evidence or facts for and against the thought. See the Psych4Schools blog, [Resilience: What you think determines the way you feel](#) for more on this.
  - **Rate the worry from 1 to 10**, where 1 is 'not a worry' and 10 is the 'worst worry ever possible'. Use a worry thermometer like the one below to illustrate the concept. Then ask, 'What would it take for the worry to be one or two points less?' Discuss ideas and help create an action plan to reduce your child's worry.



- **Ask the following three questions:**
  - 'What is the best that could possibly happen in this situation?'
  - 'What is the worst that could possibly happen in this situation?'
  - 'What is most likely to happen in this situation?'

For each of the three questions, ask 'How likely is it that this will happen?' For older children ask them to estimate how likely it is to come true. For example, '10% likely that everyone will laugh at me.'

Then ask, 'What could you do to cope if the worst outcome did happen? Who could you ask for help?' Once identified, you can help the child to plan how to cope if such an outcome were to occur. Anxiety can cause children to underestimate their ability to cope, and overestimate the likelihood of negative events. These questions help them to re-evaluate their thinking.

- **Focus on your child's strategies, rather than end results.** This is particularly helpful with schoolwork. For example, have the child focus on 'How did I get it right/wrong' rather than 'I got it right/wrong'. Not only does this shift thinking away from what went wrong, but provides strategies they can use next time.



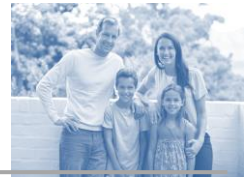
### 5. Ensure your child is well rested, healthy and feels safe

Children (and adults) are better able to cope if they are well rested, hydrated, eat healthy food and feel safe.

- **Implement predictable home routines.** This increases feelings of safety and helps reduce anxiety for you and your child.
  - **Set household rules with logical, fair, consistent and predictable consequences** if they are broken. Keep consequences short with opportunities for taking responsibility by understanding how their behavior has affected the other person, helping to suggest a natural or logical consequence, offering an apology, or demonstrating improved behaviour.
  - **Set a no yelling rule.** Hold conversations in the same room, rather than calling out from another room.
  - **Set chores and routines** for morning, after school and bedtime.
  - **Inform and involve your children in changes to daily or weekly plans.** If possible, let them know ahead of time. For example, some children may be unable to concentrate at school because they don't know who will pick them up, or whether Mum will be working late and not home before bedtime to say goodnight.
- **Limit extra-curricula activities to 1 - 3 mornings or nights per week.** This will vary depending upon the activity and the child. Children need time for rest, family time and unstructured play. Too many structured commitments can increase anxiety, and leave your child feeling stressed or burnt out.
- **Shield children from distressing or adult issues.** Increasingly, children are exposed to adult issues they are ill-prepared to manage.
  - **Keep discussions about disturbing events or adult topics out of earshot.** If you are going through a separation, job loss or other stressful event, minimize discussion about the issues while your child is around.
  - **If children see or hear distressing events in the media** follow tips in the [Psych4Schools newsletter article on managing fears](#). Widespread media exposure may lead some children to worry about the safety of themselves, their families, and the future of the planet. This is particularly apparent following repeated replaying of events such as terrorist or hostage situations and severe weather.
  - **Be guided by the [Australian Classification Board](#) for film and computer games.** Even PG classified (parental guidance) films and games may contain content that some children will find confusing or upsetting. Consider the need to monitor viewing or playing of films and games. The [Commonsense media website](#) has guides on appropriate ages for specific television shows, games, movies, apps and other media.
  - **Seek help for family violence.** Such violence is about power and control. A child who is victim of, witnesses, or hears domestic violence is often traumatised and does not feel safe. No one has the right to be abusive towards you or your child. Family violence is child abuse. See websites, such as the [Domestic Violence Resource Centre](#).

#### Children need:

- 8-12 hours of sleep each night.
- A healthy balanced diet.
- 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise each day.
- To feel safe.



## Resources

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