

Anxiety tips for parents

Anxiety is a condition that everyone experiences. Parents may inadvertently perpetuate children's fears through:

- Force
- Ridicule
- Punishment
- Ignoring
- Overprotection

Parents can help their children cope with their fears. Some things are preventative (such as being a good listener and model) and some are curative (such as teaching self-talk and relaxation).

Good ideas for managing fears:

- ✓ Remember the child's sleep times: With overtiredness comes a sense of being overwrought and there is less likelihood that she will comply. Perhaps sometimes it might mean early bedtime for parents too. Have a routine. Children thrive on rules and structure – then they know what to expect.
- ✓ Listen: Be available and open. It is best to have the 'big talks' in the day time.
- ✓ Protect and comfort: Make sure your child's environment is safe and secure.
- ✓ Modelling: Remember to demonstrate your confidence in the safety of your world.
- ✓ Relaxation: Teach your child to relax and release tension which fear produces. Deep breathing, visual imagery (favourite place, beach, sun, warmth, meditation - there are some beautiful children's books on guided imagery in bookshops)
- ✓ Harness the imagination: Children can defeat anything scary in their imagination.
- ✓ Teach the facts: About war, about death, conduct funerals for animals with music, dancing and good food.
- ✓ Diversion: What's happening on the weekend? How many cars are there if you can see one in front and three behind your car?
- ✓ Exercise: The universal antidote for high anxiety. Encourage your child to exercise regularly – it can reduce overall anxiety levels.
- ✓ Drawing: Encourage your child to draw their most scary thought. You may then be able to empathise with just how real and powerfully scary their fears are – then help them express their own power over their fear. Burn the scary picture, or cut it up or draw it over and over again, but getting smaller each time until it disappears.
- ✓ Rewards: Your child is likely to make more effort and be more willing to take risks if they are motivated by rewards. Maybe it could be staying up late for one night.
 - And the most important of all:
- ✓ Self talk: Teach them to talk through their fears to themselves, which is a good way of coping e.g. some coping statements:
 - **Before:**
 - This is going to upset me, but I know how to deal with it.
 - I might be worried now, but I had a great day at school yesterday. Getting upset won't help. Stay calm, time for a few deep breaths, just keep relaxing.
 - **During:**
 - My muscles are starting to feel tight. Time to relax and slow things down. Think positively, relax and smile.

- I can choose to think differently.
 - Nothing serious is going to harm me.
 - Nothing serious is going to harm mum.
 - I have people who care about me.
 - I've survived this before and I'll survive this one too.
- **After:**
 - That wasn't as hard as I thought!
 - It could have been a lot worse.
 - I'm doing better at this all the time.
 - I handled that pretty well.

*Acknowledgements to Julie Fitzgerald, Psychologist

Expectations of your child

It's important that you have the same expectations of your anxious child that you would of another child (to go to birthday parties, make decisions, talk to adults). However, understand that the pace will need to be slower and there is a process involved in meeting this end goal. You can help your child break down big tasks into smaller steps that your child can accomplish (first go to the party with your child and agree to stay as long as your child is interacting with others, next time stay for the first half hour). You can help role-play or act out possible ways your child could handle a difficult situation. Saying it out loud makes kids more confident and more likely to try the strategy when your child is alone.

Build your child's personal strength

It's important to praise your child for facing challenges, trying something new or brave behavior. Some children like big loud exuberant praises, others like a quiet pat on the back. There is a lot you can do to help build your child's competence. Search to find avenues where your child can show they are good at something (music, art, sports). Also be sure your child has jobs around the house that show your child is contributing to the family.

Letting your child learn to do things on his/her own

While tempting, it is best not to take over or do it for your child. While this might help your child feel better right now, the message your child is getting is that you don't believe your child can do it. Then your child will start to think the same way about him or herself. Try not to get caught continually reassuring your child that everything will be okay. Teach your child to answer his/her own questions and provide the reassurance him/herself. You can model how you think through and respond to your child's questions.

Helping your child handle their own feelings

It is okay to let your child experience some anxiety. Your child needs to know that anxiety is not dangerous but something your child can cope with. You can let your child know all feelings are okay and it is all right to say what you feel. Anxious children sometimes have a hard time expressing strong emotions like anger or sadness because they are afraid people will be angry with them. It's okay to take time for yourself even if your child wants to be with you at all times. You are modeling for your child that everyone needs some time to themselves.

Passing on your fears

Try to keep your fears to yourself and as best you can present a positive or at least neutral description of a situation. Let them know that it is safe to explore. It is not helpful to laugh or

minimize your child's fear. But humor does help one deal with the world, so show your child how to laugh at life's absurdities and mistakes.

Working together as parents

It is important to work with your spouse to have an agreed upon way of handling your child's anxiety that you both feel comfortable with. It is very important that one parent not be "too easy" because the other parent "pushes your child too much." This is very confusing for your child who does not know what to count on.

Consequences

Don't confuse anxiety with other types of inappropriate behavior. It is very important to set both expectations and have limits and consequences for inappropriate behavior. Parents who have reasonable expectations of their children and clear and consistent limits and consequences for behavior along with love and acceptance have the most competent, self-confident and happy children.