

Strategies to support anxious children

When kids have anxious thoughts or feelings, a common response from the adults in their lives is to step in and solve the problem.

If they're terrified of dogs, it's pretty reasonable to keep them away from the pitbull next door....right?

Well, not really. By helping children avoid scary situations, you're reinforcing and fuelling their **anxiety**. They're also missing out on opportunities to develop coping skills and prove to themselves they can deal with the **anxious** thought or feeling next time it comes up.

The best thing you can do for your child is to help them learn how to cope with anxiety.

10 strategies to try

1. Start by slowing down

Encourage your child to take some slow, deep breaths to calm the physical effects of anxiety. Practice together by breathing in for three seconds, holding for three seconds, then out for three. Once they're feeling a bit calmer, you can talk through what's worrying them.

2. Make time to worry

Setting aside some designated time to deal with worries can stop anxious thoughts from taking over. Try creating a daily ritual called 'worry time', and encourage children to draw or write down whatever's bothering them. You can make the activity a bit more fun by decorating a 'worry box' or building a 'worry wall' out of post-its. When the time is up – after 10 to 15 minutes – shut the worries up in the box or tear them off the wall and say goodbye to them for the day

3. Climb that ladder

Instead of skirting the scary situation, you could try a technique called 'laddering' – breaking down worries into manageable chunks and gradually working towards a goal.

Let's say your child is afraid of water and swimming. Instead of avoiding the pool, create some mini-goals to build their confidence. Start out by just sitting and watching other kids swimming. As they feel more comfortable get them to try dangling their legs in the water, then standing in the shallow end, and so on

4. Encourage positive thinking

Kids with anxiety often get stuck on the worst-case scenario or 'what ifs' in any situation. You can help them shift these thinking patterns by:

- reminding them of times they've dealt with similar issues in the past and how things worked out OK
- helping them to challenge the scary thought with facts and evidence. For example, we know that crocodiles can't survive under our bed
- make a plan for how they'll respond if things don't go as they'd like

5. Have a go

Anxious kids often worry about making mistakes or not having things perfect. This can lead to them avoiding situations or activities – they'd rather sit out than get it wrong. Emphasise giving new things a try and having fun over whether something's a success or failure.

6. Model helpful coping

Don't just tell your child how to overcome emotions – show them. When you get anxious or stressed, verbalise how you're coping with the situation: "This looks a bit scary, but I'll give it a go." And hey, you might even knock off one of your own fears.

7. Help your child take charge

Think about what you can do to make your child feel like they have some control over the scary situation. For example, if your child gets anxious about intruders, make shutting and locking their bedroom window part of their night-time responsibilities.

8. Be upfront about scary stuff

Lots of kids have worries about death, war, terrorism or things they see on the news. This is all really normal. Talk through their fears and answer any questions truthfully. Don't sugar-coat the facts – try and explain what's happening in a way that puts their fears in perspective.

9. And finally, check your own behaviour

Kids pick up all sorts of signals from the adults in their lives, so have a think about the messages you're sending. Over-protective family members can inadvertently reinforce children's fears that the world is a dangerous place where everything can hurt you. Similarly, parents who 'over-help' are subconsciously telling their kids that they can't do anything without adult support.

If you're prone to 'helicoptering', try taking a step back and waiting next time before you jump in. It can be hard seeing your child distressed, but figuring things out for themselves is an important step in building resilience.

Remember, the goal for most kids isn't to eliminate anxiety completely. It's really about giving them the skills to manage anxiety so it doesn't get in the way of enjoying life.

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