



Supporting your Anxious Child

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As parents, it's natural for us to want to shield our children from anxiety but by doing so we will usually not be successful at making the anxiety go away and in some cases we will actually reinforce it and make it harder for our children to cope with. Navigating and managing anxiety is an essential life skill that will serve our children in years to come and would help them learn to tolerate how uncomfortable it feels. As awful as it feels for our children to go through it, and as awful as it feels to watch them struggle, helping them accept and work through their anxious moments is the most effective way to promote their sense of control over their anxiety. Following are a number of tips and guidelines to follow:

1. **Validate** – avoid reassuring your anxious child. Instead, validate their uncomfortable feelings and provide support to tolerate the experience without trying to solve the problem for them or taking the trigger away.
2. **Normalize** – anxiety is a normal protective reaction that is not physically harmful (despite its many physiological symptoms). Everyone has some levels of anxiety that are healthy for us and motivate us to learn new things and make progress in our lives. Share with your child what makes you anxious and look for sign of anxiety in others (people and animals).



3. **Breathe deeply** – Anxiety is a form of fight or flight response, triggered by the amygdala in our brain when our brain perceives a threat. Whether the threat is real or not, the brain perceives it as real and acts upon it. Breathing deeply can trigger a relaxation response that will reassure the amygdala that there is no real threat. Tell your child that you will breathe with him/her to let their brain know that they are safe. Practice deep breathing with your child on a regular basis when your child is calm so it will be easier to access that skill when triggered.
4. **Encourage expression** – drawing, painting or writing about an anxiety provoking situation can provide children with an outlet for their feelings that are harder to verbally express.
5. **Repeat positive messages** – repeat mantras such as “ I love you”, “You are safe”, “You can do this” to sooth their nervous system and convince them that they can tolerate the anxious feelings. Help your child say “I can do this” 10 times at variable volume.
6. **Partner with your child** – reassure your child that you will stay present with them while they deal with their anxiety and that you will work together to help them get through this.
7. **Challenge your child** – Challenge your child to face his/her anxiety. If they can look at a snake, can they challenge themselves to touch a snake?
8. **Rate it** – help your child rate their anxiety level from 0-5 (5 is a panic attack and 0 is no anxiety).



9. **Externalize it** – Say “I know this is your anxiety (or OCD) talking, not you” and do not get sucked into trying to solve the triggering problem.
10. **Be prepared** – expect the anxiety to re-appear. Your goal is not to get rid of anxious feelings and of triggers (that’s an unrealistic goal) but rather to learn how to live your life knowing that anxiety will come and go and tolerating it without letting it take control.
11. **Count** – reassure your child that the uncomfortable feeling will pass (it’s time limited) and that getting comfortable can help calm the mind and the body. Counting different items (number of things with red color, number of hats in the room etc.) can be a way to occupy and sooth the mind.
12. **I can’t wait until _____** – get your child excited about a future event.
13. **Use a checklist** – since anxiety can hijack the “thinking brain” (the prefrontal lob) carry a checklist with coping skills your child is familiar with and has practiced. Pointing to a coping skill in a list can sometimes be easier than verbally asking for it.
14. **Visualize** – visualization is an effective tool against anxiety. Help you child practice traveling to a happy place when they are calm so that they can successfully access it during anxious moments.
15. **Hug** – ask you child in advance what kind of touch they find calming. Physical contact can help for your child relax and feel safe while coping with anxious feelings.
16. **Write a new story** – help your child write their anxiety story with a few different endings.



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17. **Reward effort** – praise your child for facing each stage of their anxiety and reinforce it by rewarding their hard work (“I know how hard it is”). Knowing that you are proud of their effort, regardless of the outcome, can alleviate the need to do it perfectly and will increase the chances of them trying to face it again.