

How Do I Help My Anxious Child?

Taken from “Freeing Your Child from Anxiety” by Tamar E. Chansky, PhD

PARENTING BEHAVIORS ASSOCIATED WITH ANXIETY IN CHILDREN

- Parental overcontrol: intrusive parenting, exerting control in conversation, limiting the autonomy and independence in conversation.
- Overprotection: excessive caution and protective behaviors without cause.
- Modeling of anxious interpretation: agreeing with child’s distortion of the risk in a situation, reinforcing the idea that normal things in the world are scary to approach
- Tolerance or encouragement of avoidance behavior: suggesting or agreeing with not trying something difficult.
- Rejection of criticism: disapproving, judgmental, dismissive, or critical behavior.
- Conflict: (not as strong a factor) two out of five studies found fighting, arguing, and disharmony in a family to be associated with high levels of anxiety.

POSITIVE PARENTING BEHAVIORS THAT BUFFER STRESS

- Rewarding coping behavior: focusing on means, not ends, rewarding children for taking on challenges, recognizing partial successes.
- Extinguishing excessive anxious behavior: reducing anxious behavior by not responding to it excessively, with either concern or anger.
- Managing one’s own anxiety: limiting displays of distress, not introducing parent’s worries into the mix.
- Developing family communication and problem-solving skills: open-house policy for positive communication and problem-solving opportunities.
- Authoritative/democratic parenting style: Parents directing children’s behavior while valuing independence is associated with lower levels of anxiety (versus authoritarian style – parents demand obedience, limit autonomy; or permissive style – parents avoid any attempt to control behavior.)

TALKING BACK TO ANXIETY! ENLISTING THE MIND TO CHANGE THE BRAIN IS THE KEY TO CBT (COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY)

Find a time when your child is calm to talk to them about worry. Using the term “worry” as an umbrella term for all the thought distortions and behaviors associated with your child’s anxiety will help create a separation between your child and their anxiety. Remember, your best tool isn’t reassurance, it’s asking open ended questions.

- What does worry tell you when you are experiencing anxiety?
- Is that what you really think? What makes you believe that?
- What does another part of you think or know?
- Do you think that’s really true? What makes you believe that?
- What do you think is more likely?

By asking questions in this manner, you can start a conversation with your child about what feeds their worries, and creates their anxious behaviors.

REMEMBER SMOKE DOESN'T ALWAYS MEAN FIRE

Have you ever been cooking something in the kitchen, and the smoke detector starts to beep? The sensor has detected smoke, assumes there is a fire, and sends out the alarm. Is there really a fire? Is there really a danger or an emergency? Consider your initial reaction to the alarm: increased heartbeat, shortness of breath, sweaty palms, etc. All of this happening in a fraction of a second until you realize you just burnt your toast, or overcooked something in the oven. This is our default “worry brain” taking over, and we can’t help that initial reaction – but we can talk back to it and say “No fire here, just burning my toast.”

In the same way, you can encourage your child to take a second look at the facts of the situation – *before* they assume the situation is too dangerous or impossible. Challenging the “worry thoughts” with “Of course that’s what worry would say in this situation – but take second look and tell me what *you* think, not what worry thinks.”

HOW TO CALM YOUR CHILD WHEN THEY ARE IN ANXIETY OR PANIC MODE

Rescuing children from scary situations when they are at the height of their anxiety doesn’t allow them the opportunity to see that the situation would have become manageable given a little time; rescuing them reinforces the tendency to seek escape rather than riding out the temporary discomfort that being in that situation creates. Instead, remind your child this moment is temporary, and will pass. Offer to help them talk back to their worry brain by asking guiding questions, or join them in calming their body down.

- Practice some deep breathing with your child
- Practice some progressive muscle relaxation
- Go for a walk or do some stretching – anything to start burning off the adrenaline

TIPS

Remember to connect with your child, not your child’s anxiety.

Transitory, or passing anxiety is a natural, normal feeling – but can become problematic anxiety when worries are excessive, uncontrollable, and out of proportion to reasonable possible outcomes or risks.

Children experiencing anxiety or panic attacks are difficult to console and redirect – which can make it hard to parent without reinforcing or validating their fears. Learning more about how to support your child in controlling their own anxiety is crucial.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy strategies are proven to be most effective for anxiety, as well as exposure therapy. Both of these require patience and significant effort on the part of the parent while the child learns how and when to use these strategies.