

# ATC Family Hour

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## Children and Anxiety

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**Anxiety** – American Psychological Association - an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure or heart rate.

- According to Golda S. **Ginsburg**, an expert on childhood anxiety at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, anxiety disorders affect one in five children in the United States.
- Anxiety disorders are one of the primary mental health problems affecting children and adolescents today. Given the wide range of stressors associated with growing up, it is important that our children have appropriate skills for coping with anxiety and other difficult emotions.
- Difference between normal and abnormal anxiety or worry is a matter of frequency and intensity as well as the degree to which the symptoms interfere with daily routines.

RIND -

R- Range (variety of symptoms)

I- Intensity (mild, moderate, severe)

N- Number (how many episodes today?)

D- Duration (how long... 1 min or 15 mins long)

- Anxiety often begins in childhood and can be overcome at any point in life, even adulthood.
- Let's help our children now, they do not need to suffer for years when early recognition and intervention can reduce their symptoms and increase self-confidence, optimism, and chances for reaching their highest potential.

In his book, "The Worried Child," Dr Foxman presents an important concept in his book. He teaches that 3 ingredients combine to create an anxiety disorder. This idea explains how, why, and when anxiety develops in children. These ingredients help us recognize how a wide variety of internal and external circumstances feed into children's anxiety

- 1) Biological sensitivity - inherited characteristics, like maybe a "sensitive" disposition
- 2) Personality - formed when temperament interacts with early life experiences
- 3) Stress - any situation that involves unusual demands, effort, adjustments, or change and can be negative or positive
  - Consider life stresses using the Life Change Scale (aka, Social Readjustment Rating Scale)

In our culture of filling up our schedules and multi-tasking with intensity...our children can easily become as rushed and stressed as we are... chances are if you are feeling stressed, your children are as well... it is important to remember that stress does not necessarily lead to anxiety, however, managing stress in our children's lives will lower their risks for physical and emotional problems.

**Even when we consider symptoms with RIND ... sometimes we still ask "What is developmentally appropriate?"**

Some Common Fears

0-6 months - Loss of support, loud noises

7-12 months - Strangers, sudden movements, large/looming objects

1 year - Separation, toilets, strangers

2 years - Separation, dark, animals, loud noises, large objects, changes in house

3-4 years - Separation, masks, dark, animals, noises at night

5 years - Separation, animals, "bad people", bodily harm

6 years - Separation, thunder and lightning, dark, sleeping or being alone, bodily injury

- Being in relationship with other parents and families similar to yours is one of the best ways to explore and recognize what is “normal.” It is also a great way to learn and get new ideas!

## *10 Practical Tips and Tools for Parents*

**1. Acknowledge your own heart** and grow in self-awareness so you can address the issues that interfere with your parenting.

**2. Tell your child you love them, regardless of feelings or behaviors**  
Every day, look for moments when things are going well and encourage them. Describe your positive feelings and share the strengths you see in your child. Children need to hear that they are loved and accepted.

**3. Learn the triggers**  
Identify the things that often lead to worry or anxiety. Being aware of these triggers may help reduce their occurrence and/or the intensity. Several examples are being over tired, hungry, not knowing what is coming up next, a change in routine, etc. When you recognize these triggers are present, take a break, try some of the remaining tips, and take a moment to point out what you see and help your child begin to grow in self-awareness.

**4. Make a plan**  
Create a simple list with your child of ways to deal with anxiety or any presenting concerns. Have this talk when feelings or behaviors are not triggered or present. This list could be posted or memorized using the tips below. It could even eliminate the freak out that comes when we find ourselves in the middle of a tension filled behavior with no plan!

**5. Teach deep breathing**  
Taking 3 or more long, slow, deep breaths is calming. It also brings an increased amount of oxygen to the brain. Introduce deep breathing as a prelude to thinking. Invite your child to take 3 deep breaths and then think about what to do next in order to accomplish the task at hand.

**6. Use empathy statements**

Empathy means understanding what another person feels and having insight into his or her thoughts and actions. Use empathy statements to build emotional intelligence and help your child feel understood. Use statements like, “You are mad! You did not like it when he took your toy.” Or “You are sad. You wanted to hold her doll longer.” (This takes practice and gets easier with effort.)

**7. Focus on the positives**

Many times worried or anxious children can get lost in their negative thoughts and self-image. Model focusing on the positive by sharing with them about the positive aspects of different situations. Try to never speak negative of yourself around them.

**8. Encourage your child to express his/her feelings**

If your child says she is worried, don’t say “No, you’re not” or “You’re fine.”

These statements do not help your child. Instead, help them feel heard by validating their experience with statements like, “You seem afraid. Can you tell me what you are worried about?” Take the time to listen and discuss her emotions or fears. If you are unable to listen right then, tell them that you want to hear about their feelings and you can talk in 10 minutes after you put her brother to bed.

**9. Establish what is acceptable and unacceptable**

Strong feelings are not all bad and we do not want to shame our children for having feelings. While we want to parent using the tips above in a consistent and calm way, we also want to have clear rules for what is not acceptable. “We never hit or pinch... even when we are really angry”, “In our family, it is important to speak with kindness”

**10. Name it!**

When we name the anxiety, we externalize it. It feels less like a part of us and more like a thing we can fight and overcome! Examples - Worry Bully, Mean Head, Worry Monster, etc.

God is creator! He is in control! He does not make mistakes.

When life is ever changing and chaotic, we can trust Him.

He is never changing and always loving.

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