

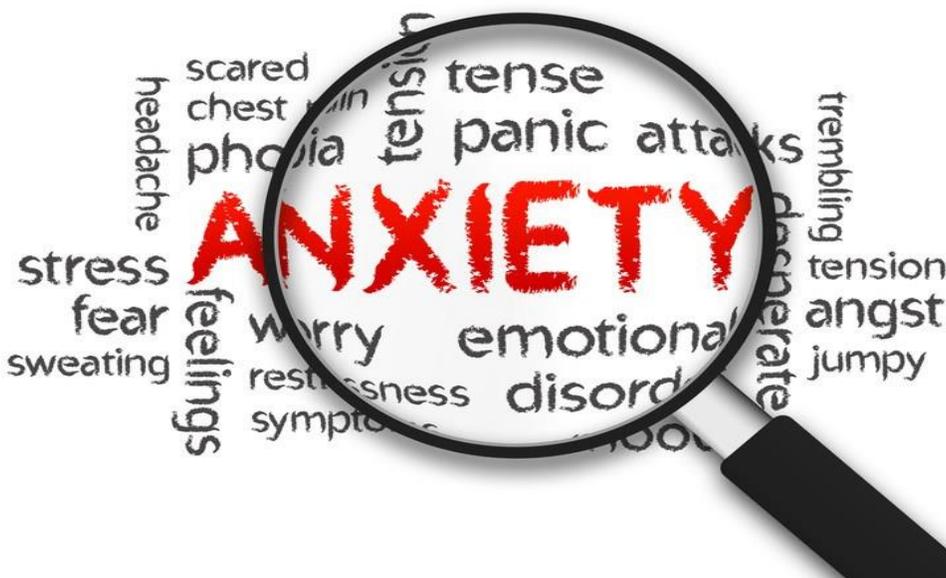
# Kids and Anxiety

## There is relief...

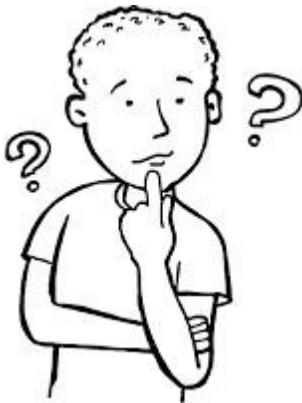
Anxiety is something that affects over 25 percent of children and adolescents and is the number one mental health issue for youth. Some degree of anxiety is a normal part of a person's healthy life. We were all born with a fight or flight response system to help protect us in dangerous situations. When a situation arises, you can either face the threat or flee from it. Anxiety can heighten performance in various situations but can also grow to a point where instead of serving us, it becomes harmful to our well-being.

“Anxiety is considered unhealthy if it keeps a child from living a normal life at home, with friends, and at school” (Walker, 2017). A child with anxiety may want to avoid certain situations that spark anxious feelings, however, doing this over time tends to increase those fears and can eventually impede healthy psychosocial development and quality of life. Anxiety, if not treated, can lead to other mental illnesses in adulthood such as depression and substance use. Children who avoid school and new experiences miss out on valuable opportunities for social connection and may not develop the social skills needed to make their way in the world.

Understanding how anxiety appears and how it operates will help you take the first steps toward helping your child. Parents play a key role in assisting children who suffer from anxiety, but it is often hard to know what to do and how to help.



Educating yourself and your child about anxiety is the first step. Worries are normal and to be expected in children. Just as adults get nervous about new things, changes, or an upset in routine, children experience this even more intensely. It is important to get specific about what is causing the anxious feelings in your child. Drill down to determine what the issue is by asking your child questions about situations surrounding the onset of the anxious feelings. Children sometimes don't know or even don't want to talk about what is going on. It is common for anxiety to present in physical symptoms such as a stomachache or nausea. When your child tells you they don't feel good, ask questions like "What happened before you started to feel crummy?". If your child won't open up at all, try suggesting that you have an idea of what it could be but give an answer that is not right. Children will always correct you when you are wrong. This might allow them the chance to correct you and provide insight on the real reason behind the anxiousness.



Often, avoidance might seem to be the answer when our little ones are struggling with anxious feelings. It sometimes is the easier route. However, avoidance is the drug of choice for people with anxiety. It is important that you don't create opportunities for avoidance if your child is experiencing anxiety.

**Saying things like, "I'm not going to help you avoid this, but I am going to make sure you feel capable enough to handle it"** can help your child to feel validated but also recognize that they need to push through whatever challenge they are facing. **Reminding your child that they can do hard things will empower them to keep going, no matter how hard it might be for them.** It is okay to validate their feelings without enabling them. Reminding children that just because they don't want to do it, doesn't mean they get to not do it.

As parents, creating a culture of capability is the key. We want our children to learn that they are capable and can overcome challenges. Otherwise, we may set them up for failure as adults that expect when challenges arise, it's okay to quit. As

adults we have experienced things that help us to better cope with the challenges we face. We might cope quietly or want to avoid talking about hard things with our kids. By modeling how to handle anxious feelings in an appropriate way, we can show kids that it is normal for things to not always be perfect and teach them appropriate ways to cope with the anxious feelings they might be experiencing. By talking about things that you are worried about or have been worried about in the past and how you overcame it, normalizes anxiousness for children who are experiencing it themselves. Processing out loud about a bad day and what had you worried can help kids to understand that it is normal to have worries throughout the day. Kids will see that their parent had something they were afraid of, and they were able to overcome it.

At the end of the day it is common to ask our children about the positives of their day. Change this up some by asking, “what did you do today that was really hard? How did you feel after you did that hard thing?” This will demonstrate the reality that hard things happen every day, to everyone, and that it is normal to have really hard things in our day. It will foster an environment for kids to understand that it is okay that sometimes things are not okay.



## 10 Tips to Parent your **ANXIOUS** Child

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1. Respect & validate your child's feelings!

2. Teach your child deep, slow, belly breathing.
3. Listen to your child and ask what they are thinking.
4. Ask your child how likely is (the thing that you're afraid of) to happen? This will challenge their anxious thinking.
5. Prompt your child with "tell me things you can do to handle this situation" and brainstorm with them. It will empower them to find solutions.
6. Don't encourage avoidance to the problem as a solution.
7. Encourage attempts to be brave, no matter how small.
8. Outline small steps leading to a bigger goal.
9. Create opportunities for your child to practice being brave and coping, then applaud their efforts.
10. Recognize your own anxiety and say aloud what you can do to calm down and remedy the situation. This models coping for your child.

Anxiety is a normal experience. With all the challenges and events that characterize life, we are all bound to experience anxiety at some point.