

How to Help Your Child Cope With Anxiety

Anxiety is the feeling of nervousness or worry that your child might experience when faced with stressful event, like a test or a sports game. Anxiety can be accompanied by physical changes, like increases in heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure. It is normal for children to worry about some challenges that they face. However, anxiety that interferes with daily activities and relationships may indicate that your child has an anxiety disorder.

How do I know if my child has anxiety?

Anxiety can affect your child physically and psychologically. Your child may have the following physical symptoms:

- Headaches.
- Upset stomach.
- Pain in other parts of the body.

Your child may also:

- Do worse in school.
- Have negative experiences with friends.
- Avoid certain people, places, and activities.
- Argue more.
- Refuse to leave the house or to try new things.
- Whine or cry more.
- Make excuses or complaints that keep him or her from being in new situations or participating in usual daily activities.



Anxiety can be difficult to identify because it is not always associated with a specific trigger.

What are some steps I can take to help my child cope with anxiety?

To help your child cope with anxiety, try taking the following steps:

- Help your child understand that it is normal to feel stressed or anxious sometimes. Let your child know that:
 - Anxiety is the body's normal mental and physical reaction, and that it helps protect us.
 - Anxiety is our body's way of telling us something is happening that needs our attention.
 - Stress reactions can be helpful in some situations, like when you are taking a test, playing a game, or performing.
 - There are healthy ways to cope with stress and anxiety.
- **Do not** avoid the situation that is causing your child anxiety. It is natural for your child to avoid a scary situation, but if you avoid it too, you will reinforce your child's fear, and you will not teach your child about dealing with the situation.
- Explore your child's fears. To do this:
 - Talk with your child about his or her fears.
 - Listen to your child. Listening helps your child feel cared about and supported.
 - Accept your child's feelings as valid.

- **Do not** tell your child to “get over it” or that there is “nothing to be scared of.” Responding in this way can make your child feel that there is something wrong with him or her and that your child should deny his or her feelings.
- Help your child problem-solve. Tell your child you believe that he or she can find a way to deal with the fears. This will help your child gain confidence.
- Teach your child how to breathe mindfully in stressful situations. Mindful breathing is a skill that will help your child self-soothe. It can be used throughout life.
- Teach your child to practice muscle relaxation. To do this:
 - Have your child flex or tense his or her muscles for a few seconds and then relax. Doing this can help your child see the difference between tension and relaxation. It can also give your child some power over the effects of stress.
 - Have your child dangle his or her arms, breathe deeply, and pretend he or she is a floppy puppet. This helps your child experience relaxation.
- Be a role model.
 - Let your child know what you do in times of stress and anxiety, and demonstrate these positive behaviors.
 - Let your child observe you and your partner discuss some stressful situations. This can help your child see how you problem-solve.
 - Practice mindful breathing with your child for 3–5 minutes at a time when neither one of you feels stressed.
- Provide a predictable schedule and structure for your child. Use clear directions, safe and appropriate limits, and consistent consequences to help your child feel safe. Children become frightened when their environment is chaotic.
- When your child feels tense or scared, give him or her a back rub or a hug.
- At bedtime, talk about what your child is grateful for that day.

When should I seek additional help?

Anxiety does not get better with age, and it may get worse if left untreated. It is important to keep track of how your child is coping in all areas of his or her life because your child may not tell you when he or she needs additional help. Talk with teachers, parents of friends, or other adults who observe your child's behavior. Seek additional help if:

- Other people notice changes in your child's behavior.
- Your child's anxiety does not improve or it gets worse, even when your child uses strategies to manage the anxiety.

Do not ignore your child's anxiety. Your child needs your help to get the proper care. Continue to support your child at home and talk with your pediatrician. Your child's health care provider can refer you to mental health professionals and psychiatrists who have experience treating children who have anxiety.

Where can I get support?

Support is available through a variety of sources, including:

- Health care providers.
- Mental health professionals or counselors.
- School social workers or counselors.
- Support groups for parents of children with mental illness.
- Friends and family.

- Your insurance provider. Insurance providers usually have a panel of mental health providers with whom they have a relationship. Ask them to give you names of specialists who can help.
- This website, which can help you find mental health professionals in your area:
<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

Where can I find more information?

Your child's health care provider can provide you with information about childhood anxiety. He or she is likely to know you, understand your needs, and give you the best direction. You can also find information about anxiety at the following websites:

- MentalHealth.gov: www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/parents-caregivers/index.html
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):
www.nami.org/Find-Support/Family-Members-and-Caregivers
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA):
www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/tips-parents-and-caregivers
- Mindful Magazine, a site that offers information about relaxation techniques:
<http://www.mindful.org/magazine/>

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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