



Reducing the impact of anxiety

As a parent of an anxious child there are many things you can do to both alleviate your child's anxiety and teach them ways to relax.

Children with anxiety find it difficult to relax and are calmer when there are consistent routines and familiar strategies in place.

Establish consistent routines

Routines reduce anxiety and regular daily patterns emphasise predictability. Anxious children do not cope well with a disorganised, spontaneous family lifestyle. A regular routine will give a sense of control to both parent and child. Formalise routines for:

- Meal times – prevent hunger with regular small meals throughout the day
- Bed time – establish quiet bedtime activities (bath, story, talk about the day)
- Exercise time – provide daily opportunities for your child to exercise.

Identify, name and talk about feelings

Help your child notice different feelings by naming them. Explain how people show their feelings (through faces, bodies, words) and that showing your feelings is an important way for others to understand how you are feeling.

Help your child notice how different feelings 'feel' in their body. For example they may experience:

- tight hands
- butterflies in stomach
- increased heart rate
- shortness of breath.

It is helpful for children to talk about their feelings, however this may not be easy, especially when they

are asked directly. Watch and listen carefully for the times when your child expresses feelings, either directly through words or indirectly through behaviours. At these times, you can help your child by acknowledging and accepting their feelings through simply reflecting them back and refraining from providing advice or asking questions.

When a child's feelings are criticised, disapproved of, or not accepted by a parent, their internal sense of self is weakened.

Provide soothing and comforting

Comforting and soothing your child can relieve anxiety. These soothing strategies communicate to the child that they are safe and cared for. Some soothing strategies include:

- reassuring verbally
- rocking
- holding and cuddling
- massaging
- humming and singing
- story telling.

A child is never too old for soothing, and anxious children need extra soothing experiences that relax and relieve the tension in their bodies.

Acknowledge and assist with fears

Children are generally not helped when parents tell them to stop being afraid of something. Acknowledge your child's fears and let them know that you will help them overcome them.

Model and encourage brave behaviour

Children look to others for guidance on how to respond in unfamiliar situations. It is important for you to act as a confident and brave role model so that your child can learn from you.

Sometimes as parents we need to act bravely even if we don't feel brave. When confronted with a situation, consider the following steps:

- acknowledge your own anxieties and make the effort to contain them in the presence of your child
- act confidently and brave, even if you don't honestly feel that way
- break down a fear into small steps and gently encourage your child to face each step
- remind your child that with practice the fear will diminish over time
- reward them for trying to approach a feared situation
- remind your child of situations that they have overcome in the past.

Teach relaxation skills

Learning relaxation skills will help your child feel better when anxious, worried or scared. It will also help them learn they have some control over their own bodies, rather than being controlled by their anxiety.

Try the following relaxation techniques with your child:

- sit comfortably and breathe deeply and slowly (as if you were blowing bubbles)
- alternately tense and relax the muscles throughout the body (from the feet to the head)
- sit down with your child on your lap and cuddle, hum, rock or caress them
- ask your child to imagine a safe, relaxing place they can visit in their mind
- ask your child to imagine a box or container where they can store their worries.

Encourage 'feeling good' activities

When children are anxious encouraging them to engage in activities they enjoy will often take their mind off their worries. Engage your child in a fun activity such as playing with a favourite toy, doing a fun art or craft project, suggesting an outside activity, playing a game, reading a book, or playing with friends.

Teach problem solving strategies

Help your child with their worries and problems by teaching them how to problem-solve. Break each situation down and show them how to work through a worry or problem:

- define the problem
- brainstorm all possible solutions and their consequences
- choose the best solution.

Do not jump in too early and try to help 'fix' your child's problems. Remember to give your child lots of time to express their negative feelings around worries and problems first where you are just listening and acknowledging feelings before helping them to figure out a solution.

Swap negative thoughts for positive ones

Help your child to understand thinking or saying negative thoughts about themselves is not helpful and will make them feel angry, hopeless, sad or more anxious.

Show them how to swap negative thoughts for positive ones. For example:

- "I'm so hopeless, I'll never do it", **replace with** "If I keep practicing, I'll get better"
- "I always make mistakes", **replace with** "Even if I make a mistake, I'll learn and do better next time".

Remember to allow your child lots of time to express their negative thoughts around worries and fears first, before helping them to find more helpful ways of thinking about the situation.

Storybooks

There are many children's books available that deal specifically with anxiety, fears and worries. These books can be very helpful for children as the stories will often model various ways of coping with fears and anxiety. I recommend the following:

- What To Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety by Dawn Huebner
- Exploring Feelings: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy to Manage Anxiety by Tony Attwood

Further Information

Please call Cairns Paediatric Psychology (07) 40 417004 for further information or to make an appointment with Danaë Owen.