

HELPING OUR CHILDREN MANAGE ANXIETY WITH EMPATHY AND ACTION



The past year has been difficult for kids, parents, and families. There are so many things that have changed and been unpredictable. Parents have been faced with challenges that they have never experienced. Changes and uncertainty often lead to increased anxiety in both children and adults. As we navigate through our lives we will encounter anxiety, so it is important for us all to have some understanding of how anxiety works. That way we are better able to recognize when it becomes a problem and actively practice anxiety management techniques as part of our overall health plan.

As parents, we must not only be able to recognize and manage anxiety in our children, we must also be able to recognize anxiety and manage our own anxiety in healthy ways. Practicing healthy anxiety management techniques benefits our own mental health, but also helps us to more effectively guide our children through the processes.

Time and time again, we have heard parents say to their children, "Do as I say, not as I do." Unfortunately, this phrase does little to teach kids how to make good decisions. Children learn by watching the people around them. They imitate the behaviors that they see, even when they are told they are wrong. When we show children that we value ourselves and our mental health, we demonstrate that mental health matters. Furthermore, when we put the work into positively managing our own mental health, we are in a better position to help our children.



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What is anxiety and when does anxiety become a problem?

In essence, anxiety is a feeling of worry, fear, stress, or uneasy apprehension. All of these feelings are completely normal. We all experience these feelings consistently in our lives and that can even be a good thing. Feelings of anxiety, worry, and fear can help us to evaluate situations for risk and help us to prepare for new things. These feelings can help us to prepare for challenges that we may encounter and to keep us safe.

Anxiety, worry, and fear only become a problem when they prevent us from doing things that we need or want to do. If we have a fear of water, we may avoid pool parties or a trip to the lake. This would not provide an everyday problem but it is a problem when family or friends want to connect with us around water. Sometimes anxieties and fears work together to prevent us from doing everyday things. Fear of failure and worries about social interactions can result in avoiding school or work. Anxieties and fears can be narrow or broad. They can affect one part of life or many.



How does anxiety affect children?

Anxiety affects children in similar ways to adults, but children's lack of personal awareness and vocabulary can make it harder for them to explain what they are feeling. Anxiety generally affects three different aspects of a person's well-being: their mind, body, and actions. It can hijack thought processes, cause physical illness or discomfort, and alter behaviors.

Mind: Thoughts and Mental Processes

One of the most common markers of anxiety is a disruption in a person's thought processes. This can include:

- Excessive worry
- Increased perception of threats
- Inability to focus
- Intrusive thoughts/Racing Mind
- Lack of Optimism
- Negative self-talk

Though these effects are usually within a person's mind, evidence of them can be noticed in the things that children say. Sometimes children may say something, "I am so nervous" or "I am scared." They may also indicate that they are feeling anxiety by asking many questions to try to gain an understanding of something they are fearing. They may also act out a fearful situation in play or you may hear them verbalize some negative thought patterns.

Body: Physical Illness and Discomfort

The effects of anxiety are not limited to the mind. Anxiety can also have noticeable physical effects. When a person feels threatened in any way, our natural defenses begin to kick in. This reaction is generally referred to as the "fight or flight" mechanism. Our bodies begin to ready ourselves to handle possible threats by releasing adrenaline. This adrenaline release causes physical symptoms and readies our bodies to take action. This reaction is not limited to physical threats, but can also be triggered by perceived social or emotional threats.

We can think about how we may begin to sweat or our heart may race before we present in front of a group. The thought of doing anything that is unfamiliar or uncomfortable can cause this reaction.

The physical symptoms that are commonly associated with anxiety include:

- Increased heart rates
- Increased rate of breathing
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Stomachaches
- Headaches
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Tiredness

As adults, we may recognize these symptoms as normal for a given circumstance. Children may not be aware that something is making them scared or nervous. They may only be able to tell us that they are not feeling well. Children may complain of headaches, stomachaches, or just complain about not feeling good.



Actions: Changes in Behavior

When anyone is experiencing anxiety, it is natural for it to affect our behaviors. Beyond complaining about physical symptoms, children may behave in ways that seem out of character for them. They may withdraw or act out to avoid situations or to express their unease. Behaviors that we can look for in our children include:

- General complaints of “not feeling well”
- Complaints about stomach or headaches
- Freezing or refusing to move
- Becoming extra clingy
- Pacing or fidgeting
- Crying or shaking
- Demonstrating avoidance or defiant behaviors such as refusing to follow directions, burying themselves with other tasks or activities, or making excuses.

Sometimes the problems only show up in certain situations or circumstances. Talk to the other adults that interact with your kids. Never hesitate to reach out to teachers, coaches, or others that interact with your children regularly to ask what they are noticing.



Reflecting on How We Manage Our Own Anxieties and Challenges

One of the most beneficial things that we can do as parents to help our children manage fear and anxiety is to examine how we manage our own anxieties. We know that children are more likely to be influenced by what they see modeled for them than what they are told to do. All people learn by watching, mimicking, and then continuing to practice the skill or behavior. This is especially true for our kids.

Unfortunately, parents are not perfect and do not magically know how to do handle every situation that we encounter. We are just humans who are trying to figure out how to handle increasingly difficult situations ourselves. We are not perfect, will never be perfect, and are not meant to be.

When we face challenges in positive and proactive ways, we show our children that they can also overcome hardships that they may encounter. Our children will face great challenges as they grow up and navigate through school, relationships, and life. They learn from what we model for them. We can normalize conversations about feelings, anxiety, and challenges. Our children can learn so much if we try to follow a “do as I say and as I try to do” model. We can show our children that we do not give up, we keep trying. We can model talking about our feelings and listening. We can show them that things are not always easy, but we can also ask for help.

In order to help us empathetically navigate anxieties and fears with our children, we can practice activities that help us tap into our own experiences with managing fears and anxieties. In the next column, you will find a list of several different ways that anxiety affects the mind, body, and actions.

Think of a time when you have felt anxious. What have you felt in this situation? How might these reactions be similar or different to those of your children? Understanding your own reaction to anxiety can help you empathize with your children.

CAREGIVER REFLECTION ACTIVITY

THINK ABOUT A TIME WHEN YOU FELT NERVOUS, SCARED, OR ANXIOUS. REFLECT ON YOUR HOW MIND, BODY, AND ACTIONS REACTED DURING THIS EVENT. CIRCLE THE THINGS THAT YOU FELT OR EXPERIENCED BELOW.

MIND

Excessive Worry
Increased Perception of Threats
Concern of What Others Think
Inability to Focus
Intrusive Thoughts/Racing Mind
Negative Self-talk
Lack of Optimism
Negative Outlook
Sense of Dread

BODY

Increased Heart Rate
Sweating
Nausea/Vomiting
Stomachache
Headache
Muscle Tension/Muscle Pain
Jaw Tension/Jaw Pain
Dry Mouth
Bowel Issues/Diarrhea
Tiredness /Fatigue

ACTIONS

Frequent Waking or Restless Sleep
Too Much or Too Little Sleep
Complaining/Whining
Crying or Yelling
Freezing or Refusing to Move
Avoiding Certain Tasks
Burying Self in Other Tasks/Procrastination
Pacing or Fidgeting
Shaking of Hands or Body
Substance Abuse

What Can We Do to Help Our Children Manage Anxiety and Fear?

As parents, we notice when our children do not quite seem to be themselves, but we may not know what to do. Each situation is different, each child is different, and each relationship is different. There is no single “right way” to help our children manage their anxiety and fear. It is important to be aware of the ways that anxiety affects your child and then work to be patient, understanding, and reassuring.

It is also important that we learn to communicate about feelings with our children. Children need to build the skills and vocabulary that help them to understand and discuss their feelings. Each child is different in the way that they express or discuss their feelings and each parent/child relationship is unique. Unfortunately, there is no formula for a successful conversation about feelings, but the best place to start is by asking questions and actively listening to what they have to say.

Tips for Active Listening

The most important thing about having a conversation with your child is that they feel that they are the most important person at that time and that they feel heard.

- **Avoid Distractions:** Put phones and other devices away.
- **Make Eye Contact:** Eye contact shows that what they are saying is important
- **Acknowledge Their Thoughts and Feelings:** Nod with understanding or Smile if appropriate
- **Ask Follow-Up Questions:** When you ask clarifying and follow-up questions, it shows that you are listening and want to learn more.
- **Keep the Conversation Focused on Your Child:** This is a time to listen and learn from your children

Make conversations a normal part of your day. It can take time to get kids used to talking but asking the right questions can help. When we ask open-ended questions, that cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no” we are able to build more meaningful conversations. This takes practice. We have included some examples of open-ended questions to get you started. It can be hard to keep the conversation going, but it does get easier with practice.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR KIDS

What made you smile today? Why did this make you smile?
 Can you tell me an example of kindness you showed or saw?
 What is something you know today that you didn't know yesterday?
 What was your least favorite part of the day? Why? How did you feel?
 What did you do in Math? (Or Reading, Art, PE, Literacy, Music)
 If you could do anything at school, what would it be? Why?
 What do you like most about school? Why is this important to you?

References:

Rapee, R. M., Wignall, A., Spence, S. H., Cobham, V., & Lyneham, H. (2008). *Helping your anxious child: A step-by-step guide for parents*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Teach Kids About Anxiety and How it Affects Them

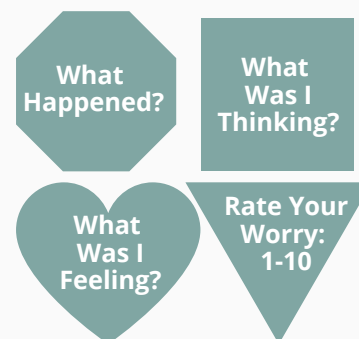
Teaching kids that anxiety is a very normal part of life can be reassuring. When children feel anxiety or worry, they can feel like they are the only ones experiencing it. Defining anxiety as a feeling of worry, fear, stress, or uneasiness is a helpful starting point, but continuing to help your child identify and name worries is also important.

Children also benefit from learning about all of the ways that anxiety can affect their whole body. We can start by discussing a time when we were very worried and describe the effects that it can on our mind and body. We can reference the reflection activity on the previous page to help. We can use our experiences to model that it is normal to feel worried and anxious. We can then ask our children, what they feel when they are feeling worried. For example, we can say, “When I am worried I feel a tightness in my chest. Some people feel sick to their stomachs or their shoulders hurt. How does your body feel when you are worried?”

Guiding Children to Link Situations, Thoughts, and Feelings

Children need practice talking about their feelings and need time and help to develop vocabulary needed to discuss them. The mere act of talking to our kids can help so much but when kids are ready to talk about their fears, worries, or anxieties, we may need a little more guidance. It is important that children begin to understand that things happen to make them worried. Linking circumstances to feelings is the starting point for healing and anxiety management.

The following tool can be used as a good reference for talking about worries and anxieties in general because it can guide the conversation to link events to feelings:



Conversation is Key

The key to helping our children navigate through life's worries and challenges starts with being able to recognize and discuss our feelings. When we normalize conversations about feelings and difficult feelings, our children will not feel alone. The first step in managing challenges is to identify the problem. Only once we understand the issue can we begin to work with it. Giving kids the ability to talk about their feelings is the first step in helping them to manage difficult feelings of anxiety, worry, and fear.