

Helping Children Deal with Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal reaction any of us may have to an experience that is frightening. With so much national attention and 24-hour news coverage of the COVID-19 crisis, how parents help their child during this time can make a significant impact on how quickly and successfully the child is able to cope with their feelings and develop new skills for managing anxiety, now and in the future.

Seeing your child suffer any kind of emotional turmoil can be upsetting to parents. While you cannot protect them from every kind of hurt, there are some steps you can take to help ensure that they develop emotionally healthy responses to the situations they face, as well as equip them to manage anxious circumstances they will face in the future.

Listen to and respect your child's feelings. Children need to feel accepted and know they can express emotions without being criticized or judged. Giving messages that indicate your child should just “get over it” or that they are weak only undermines your child’s self-confidence. Giving them the time and space to process their emotions with a compassionate ear can be one of the most helpful ways you can convey that you value and accept your child and their emotions.

Create a safe environment. This may include checking in with your child regularly, giving them a safe space and time to vent any fears or frustrations they have. Some of your child’s emotions may trigger some uncomfortable emotions of your own, so establishing a safe environment may also mean listening to some emotions that make you uncomfortable. You will have to avoid giving in to the temptation to change the subject or shut down your child before they are heard. Your child’s emotions are probably not on your schedule, so be open to being present for your child whenever they need you.

Stay calm. Children tend to pick up on their parents’ emotions. Sometimes, your own anxiety over a situation can contribute to the way your child responds, even when you think you are cleverly hiding your feelings. Allowing your child the freedom to appropriately discuss feelings may generate a sense of surprise, anger, fear, or disappointment on your part. As much as possible, maintain a calm demeanor so that your child does not feel judged for their feelings.

Set Limits. The ways you permit your child to express emotions should be within what is appropriate for their age and circumstances. It can be destructive to allow your child to violate appropriate limits in the hopes that they will feel better later. This only reinforces unhealthy methods of processing emotions. This is especially true when their anxiety comes out as anger, acting out, or self-destructive behavior. By the same token, avoid inadvertently reinforcing your child’s anxiety by being too accommodating. They do need to learn to continue to function, even when dealing with strong emotions.

Talk about your own feelings. You may share your child's anxiety, or maybe you have been anxious in the past. Open up about what has made you feel that way and what you have done that helped you manage your emotions. This can convey that feelings are normal and that even adults have to learn to cope. This also helps your child feel less isolated and more secure that they are not alone. Be careful, however, not to one-up your child, or come across as though you are dismissing the severity of their own circumstances.

Maintain a consistent routine. Routines can provide comfort and security by enabling your child to predict what is going to happen that day. Knowing the plan, either because it's the routine or because you have discussed what is going to happen next, enables your child time to process and prepare mentally for a transition in activities. Surprises often reinforce feelings of anxiety and insecurity. You want to make your child's life as predictable as possible while they work through their emotions. When something unexpected does come up, enabling your child to have some measure of control can help reduce their anxiety. Offering them choices about what time, where, or in what order events happen can give them some sense of control.

Avoiding emotions is not the same as coping with them. While some distracting activities, such as video gaming and social media can be useful in limited doses, over-indulging in these often serve as escapes which allow your child to avoid dealing with difficult emotions. Left to their own devices, children sometimes give up needed sleep in order to spend time in these activities, which decreases their ability to handle their emotions. It is important that you recognize when such behavior becomes unhealthy and step in to regulate them.

Much of your child's ability to negotiate challenging emotions throughout life will depend on the self-confidence they develop as a child. Through creating a sense of safety, acceptance, and predictability, you can create an environment for your child to gain the confidence that they can cope with uncomfortable feelings and empower them to keep moving forward whenever they encounter anxious situations.



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