

Overcoming Anxiety in Children

Everyone experiences anxiety to a point. It is a normal, human, protective response to situations we perceive as risky or dangerous. A little anxiety makes us pay attention; be mindful when we are crossing the road; be attentive driving the car; be watchful when the children are swimming or on play equipment.

However, for adults and children alike, anxiety can become a problem when it begins to interfere with daily enjoyment of life; when we become unreasonably fearful of situations which are not really dangerous or threatening. This can be distressing both for the one who is feeling anxious and for those around them and can have a negative impact on their lives.

Anxiety is, by and large, a learned behaviour. In children who are learning their way in the world, it is normal to be fearful of (among other things) spiders, adults who are strangers, growling dogs and even the dark. We need to teach children how to be safe, but we also need to teach them how to feel safe. Sometimes children become overly fearful of everyday things like attending school, making mistakes, about getting into trouble or going to parties. With the right approach and gentle encouragement, often these worries will subside with time. It is helpful to pay attention to what is happening with similarly aged children to gauge what might well be age appropriate fears. Ask your child's teacher if you are not sure what are appropriate fears for your child's age.

The following are some tips to help you help your children to deal with anxiety:

- Acknowledge your child's fear. Don't dismiss it, but do gently encourage them to do things they feel anxious about.
- Wait until your child actually gets anxious before you step in to help.
- Praise your child for doing something you know they were anxious about, and avoid labelling them a "shy" or "anxious" child.
- Help your child to work out if their fears are realistic or not. Hear them out with an open mind. Sometimes the actual fears are founded in something we hadn't anticipated. We knew a family whose young children were quite distressed about moving house. It took some discussions with the children to establish that having visited some open homes with their mother, they didn't like the toys they saw in the other homes. They had thought that changing house meant exchanging contents. Needless to say that was easily solved but highlights the fact that it's easy to assume your children are seeing things the same way you are. By talking through these fears with your child you are not only helping them to work out if they are likely to eventuate, but also helping them to draw their own conclusions based on evidence.
- Make genuine efforts to foster your child's self-esteem and avoid saying things like "Don't be such a baby" or "a mummy's boy/girl."

One of the most common anxieties experienced in primary school years is **separation anxiety**. The following tips might help you address this, or nip it in the bud:

- Say good bye quickly, don't drag it out. Wish them a happy day, tell them you'll see them after school and leave with a smile. Of course say, "I love

you” but don’t add, “I’m going to miss you too.” This can normalise their missing you, and even cause them to “worry” that you will be anxious at work without them.

- Maintain a happy and relaxed expression on your own face. Remember that anxiety can be learned from you. If you are anticipating another “scene” at the classroom door, you may be looking more stressed than you realise.
- Practise separations and reunions. Rather than avoid them, increase the times of separation and include different scenarios. Make reunions happy and positive exchanges. Avoid conversations like, “How did you cope with the anxiety?”, “I hope you didn’t miss me too much”. Praise them if they volunteer good coping strategies.
- Allow your child something from home that increases their feeling of safety, for example, a special toy or book in the school bag.
- Talk to the school librarian. There are lots of children’s books telling stories about overcoming anxiety.

Severe anxiety can impact on your child’s health and happiness. Don’t dismiss it, and seek professional help if it persists.

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