



Helping Your Child Manage Anxiety



Anxiety is an irrational fear that something bad could happen, even when it is unlikely.

This is different from being afraid in situations where there is actual danger.

It's not unusual for children of all ages to experience anxiety. Sometimes, anxiety can actually be helpful and improve performance in high-stress situations. But when anxiety results from an irrational fear, it can cause a child to have repeated thoughts about that fear and to avoid uncomfortable and stressful situations.

The extent to which anxiety impacts someone's life varies tremendously from person to person. Some people occasionally avoid uncomfortable and stressful situations, and it doesn't interfere with their activities. However, for others, a pattern of avoidance may become problematic and negatively affect relationships, school and work attendance and performance, and independence.

If your child experiences anxiety and reports physical discomfort, you should first have him or her evaluated by his or her primary care physician. Common physical symptoms of anxiety include stomach pain, shortness of breath and increased heart rate, all of which could be signs of a medical condition.

Strategies to Manage Symptoms

Once your child's physician addresses any medical considerations, behavioral health experts can recommend individualized, evidence-based strategies that can help you and your child manage anxiety symptoms.

Here are few of those strategies:

- Praise your child when he or she demonstrates courage and sticks to daily routines while experiencing anxiety.
- Tell your child that you expect him or her to continue daily activities, such as attending school and participating in extracurricular activities, even when he or she is experiencing anxiety. Allowing your child to avoid a situation that he or she fears may unintentionally send the message that the situation really is unsafe and should be avoided.

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- **Have your child repeatedly practice dealing with the situation that makes him or her anxious.** This exercise is referred to as “exposure” in the research, and can be one of the most effective, powerful ways for children to manage anxiety. Such exercises are often most effective when children start them on a small scale and gradually build on their successes, and when they are connected to some type of reward.

For example, if your child fears being home alone, have him or her practice being alone in a preferred room of your home for one minute a day when a caregiver is home. Your child can then gradually start spending longer amounts of time alone in other areas of your home, being on different levels of the home than a caregiver and practicing when it’s dark outside. (Your encouragement is important, because kids often will be hesitant to participate in these exercises on their own.)

- **If your child misses planned school or extracurricular activities due to anxiety, have him or her rest for the day with no access to electronics, friends or activities.**
- **Avoid initiating conversations about anxiety or repeatedly checking on your child for anxiety symptoms.**
- **Establish a 10-minute “worry time” each day when you and your child can discuss his or her anxiety.** During this time, listen and be supportive.
- **Help your child focus on practicing good health habits,** such as getting enough sleep and following a healthy diet.
- **Don’t discuss your own anxiety with your child.**
- **Demonstrate courage to your child by identifying something that worries you and letting your child see that you can successfully face that fear.**

- **Be honest.** Bad things do occasionally happen, and children may face a worrisome or dangerous situation. Let your child know that these situations are rare and that you will do everything possible to protect him or her from danger.
- **Help your child become more aware of what causes his or her anxiety** and discuss what he or she does as a result of that anxiety and whether it is helpful or not.
- **Help your child identify what motivates him or her to persevere during anxious times** and focus on strengthening that motivation.
- **Develop strategies your child can use to physically calm down,** such as relaxation and meditation exercises, and practice these techniques every day. (Online videos or apps may be helpful in getting started.)

Teaching your child to manage anxiety takes effort and your support. While anxiety symptoms may not completely disappear, learning strategies to manage anxiety can limit the negative effects of anxiety on your child’s daily routines.

Additional Resources

- ***Freeing Your Child from Anxiety***, by Tamar Chansky, Ph.D.
- ***What to Do When You Worry Too Much***, by Dawn Huebner, Ph.D.

➔ **For more information** or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.

