

Tips for managing your child's anxiety

If your child expresses a feeling of being anxious, reassure them that these feelings are a normal response to new people, events or potentially challenging situations. Help your child understand that there is a great deal they can do to manage their anxious feelings, so they can get on with the activities they enjoy.

Explain anxiety

If your child is anxious he may struggle to explain how he feels. An important first step in anxiety self-management is explaining to your child how anxiety works.

Sufficient sleep, good nutrition and exercise are essential for anxious kids. Support your child to adhere to their optimal bedtime so they wake naturally each morning, reduce sugar, take care of their gut health through good nutrition and encourage regular exercise for optimal mental health. Routines are great for anxiety as they are predictable.

- Teach your child that the part of the brain that protects them from danger (the amygdala – pronounced ahh-mig-dah-la), is always on high alert when they are anxious
- Explain that the amygdala can sometimes sense danger where there is none, but the body prepares to fight for life or flee from danger as if it's protecting them during an anxious episode, like facing a hungry lion
- Discuss that the amygdala can't differentiate between a hungry lion and anxiety like meeting new people or doing a presentation or some other task they must face
- Talk about the changes that happen in their body to power them up to fight or flee, including increased heart and breathing rates and the pumping of the blood from the stomach to the arms and legs, which can cause nausea and even vomiting for some

Help recognise anxiety-inducing events

There are many things that can evoke anxiety in your child, including:

- Stressful events
- Life changes
- Transitions
- Difficult experiences
- New or unfamiliar situations

Help your child to recognise the specific situations and events that make them feel anxious such as meeting new friends, sitting tests and fear of rejection. In this way you can help your child manage and minimise their feelings of anxiety.

Respond with understanding

When your child feels anxious, the part of the brain that controls rational thinking, decision-making and concentration temporarily goes offline. They can feel easily overwhelmed by simple, everyday events and situations. Rather than protecting your child by allowing them to avoid meeting these challenges, or dismissing them as trivial, validate their feelings with statements such as:

- “I can see you’re feeling worried about going meeting the other kids in the gym class”
- “Thanks for telling me you feel nervous about the party. It’s understandable.”
- “I see you’re really anxious about this right now. I know it’s hard for you.”

Resist the temptation to rescue or fix a situation. Respond with empathy and understanding to your child’s concerns.

Self-regulation-managing the anxious feelings

Help your child develop the tools to regulate and push their anxious feelings to the background. Practise these anxiety management tools when your child is feeling calm, and it will be easier for them to practise when they are nervous. These include:

- Taking some deep breaths: Deep belly breathing from the diaphragm calms the amygdala, reducing feelings of anxiousness
- Bringing their attention back to the present: Use their senses to bring their attention to the present moment and away from their worries – “Tell me five things you see, four things you hear and something you smell.”
- Getting them moving: Physical exercise is not only a great distraction but it releases feel-good endorphins that help children and young people feel better and more optimistic about the future.
- Defusing their thoughts: Anxious thoughts can get stuck, refusing to budge no matter how unwanted they are. Help your child to distance themselves from their thoughts by placing distancing statements in front of their thoughts. Replace “I’m going to fail the test” with “I had a thought that I’m going to fail the test.” Rather than changing their thinking, assist your child to distance themselves from unhelpful thoughts.

Get the foundations correct

Sufficient sleep, good nutrition and exercise are essential for anxious kids. Support your child to adhere to their ideal bedtime so they wake naturally each morning, reduce sugar, take care of their gut health through good nutrition and encourage regular exercise for superior mental health.

There is a great deal you can do to help your child manage their anxiety. Start by assisting your child to understand the foundations of anxiety, show your genuine understanding of their feelings and be ready to support them emotionally to push their anxiety to the background.