

Helping children manage anxiety

Recognise worry, build confidence and practise coping skills

Worry is a normal alarm system

Every child feels anxious sometimes. Worry can alert us to danger, but an overactive alarm may make everyday situations feel threatening even when they are manageable.

The goal is not to remove every worried feeling. It is to help your child face challenges with growing confidence.



Anxiety often shows up in three ways

Body

Stomach aches, a racing heart, sweaty hands, tense muscles or difficulty sleeping.

Thoughts

"Something bad will happen." "I cannot handle this." "Everyone will laugh."

Actions

Avoiding school or social situations, seeking repeated reassurance or staying close to adults.

The avoidance cycle

Avoidance brings short-term relief, but can stop children learning that they can cope.

A child may need medical assessment for new or concerning physical symptoms. Anxiety should not be assumed to explain every symptom.

Become a worry detective

A child-friendly way to explore worried thoughts

The same event can create different feelings depending on what we predict will happen. “Detective thinking” helps children gather clues rather than automatically believing their first worry.

01**Spot the worry**

“What does your worry say might happen?”

02**Look for clues**

“What facts support that idea? What facts suggest a different outcome?”

03**Find a balanced thought**

“What is a more realistic way to look at this? What could you do if it is hard?”

04**Try and learn**

Take a small action, then notice what actually happened and how you coped.

Example: “If I ask a question, everyone will laugh.” → “Some classmates may notice, but asking questions helps me learn. I can try once and see what happens.”

Build a confidence ladder

Small, supported steps help children learn they can cope

Choose one specific goal with your child. Break it into manageable steps, from easier to harder, and practise repeatedly. Adjust the pace to your child's needs.

Example goal: joining a class activity

- 1 Talk with a trusted adult about the activity.
- 2 Watch the activity from nearby.
- 3 Join for five minutes with support.
- 4 Join for a longer period.
- 5 Participate more independently.

Before a step: "How big is your worry, from 0 to 10?"

Afterwards: "What did you predict? What happened? What did you learn?"

Make steps achievable

Choose situations that are genuinely safe, appropriate and possible. Avoid overwhelming or forcing a child.

Reward courageous effort

Praise practice and persistence, not just success. Small non-material rewards can help reinforce effort.

Repeat skills between sessions. For complex anxiety, trauma, bullying or school difficulties, develop steps collaboratively with the treating clinician and school.

A parent's role: anxiety coach

Support, encourage and gradually build independence

Validate before problem-solving

"I can see this feels scary." Then ask, "What is one small step we could try together?"

Encourage independence

Offer enough assistance to begin, then gradually step back as your child practises and gains confidence.

Be consistent and model coping

Keep routines predictable, practise skills regularly and show how you respond to your own worries.

A three-question family check-in

1. What was one worry today?
2. What did you try, even if it felt uncomfortable?
3. What is one small step for tomorrow?

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