

ANXIETY

1. Stop Reassuring the Child

The child worries. You know there is nothing to worry about, so you say, “Trust me. There’s nothing to worry about.” All sorted! We all wish it were that simple. Why does your reassurance fall on deaf ears? It’s actually not the ears causing the issue. The anxious child desperately wants to listen to you, but the brain won’t let it happen.

During periods of anxiety, there is a rapid dump of chemicals and mental transitions executed in your body for survival. One by-product is that the prefrontal cortex — or more logical part of the brain — gets put on hold while the more automated emotional brain takes over. In other words, it is really hard for the child to think clearly, use logic or even remember how to complete basic tasks. What should you do instead of trying to rationalize the worry away? Try something I call the *FEEL method*:

- **Freeze** — pause and take some deep breaths with your child. Deep breathing can help reverse the nervous system response.
- **Empathize** — anxiety is scary. Your child wants to know that you get it.
- **Evaluate** — when the child is calm, it’s time to figure out possible solutions and to highlight that it was ok, they got through it.
- **Let Go** - Let go of the responsibility; you are giving the child the tools to manage their worry.

2. Highlight Why Worrying is Good

Remember, anxiety is tough enough without a child believing that *Something is wrong with me*. Many kids even develop anxiety about having anxiety. Teach the child that worrying does, in fact, have a purpose.

When our ancestors were hunting and gathering food there was danger in the environment, and being worried helped them avoid attacks from the saber-toothed cat lurking in the bush. In modern times, we don’t have a need to run from predators, but we are left with an evolutionary imprint that protects us: worry.

Worry is a protection mechanism and it is perfectly normal. It can help protect us, and *everyone* experiences it from time to time. Sometimes our system sets off false alarms, but this type of worry (anxiety) can be put in check with some simple techniques.

3. Bring Your Child’s Worry to Life

As you probably know, ignoring anxiety doesn’t help. But bringing worry to life and talking about it like a real person can. Create a worry character for your child and Give it a name eg: Wibble the Worrier. Wibble personifies anxiety. Wibble lives in the old brain that is responsible for protecting us when we’re in danger. Of course, sometimes Wibble gets a little out of control and when that happens, we have to talk some sense into Wibble. You can use this same idea with a stuffed animal or even role-playing at home.

Personifying worry or creating a character has multiple benefits. It can help demystify this scary physical response children experience when they worry. It can reactivate the logical brain, and it’s a tool your children can use on their own at any time.

4. Help Them Go from What If to What Is

For someone experiencing anxiety, this type of mental time travel, worrying about what might happen in the future, can exacerbate the worry. A typical time traveler

asks what-if questions: “What if I can’t open my locker and I miss class?” “What if Suzy doesn’t talk to me today?”

Research shows that coming back to the present can help alleviate this tendency. One effective method of doing this is to practice mindfulness exercises. Mindfulness brings a child from what if to what is. To do this, help the child simply focus on their breath for a few minutes. This is a good time for a distraction technique – a game, a conversation change, a job to do.

5. Avoid Avoiding Things that Cause Anxiety

A child at school cannot always avoid events that cause anxiety. As a carer, our instinct might be to help them do so, but unfortunately, in the long run, avoidance makes anxiety worse.

So what’s the alternative? Try a method we call laddering. Children who are able to manage their worry break it down into manageable chunks. Laddering uses this chunking concept and gradual exposure to reach a goal.

Let’s say the child is afraid of sitting on the swings in the park. Instead of avoiding this activity, create mini-goals to get closer to the bigger goal (e.g., go to the edge of the park, then walk into the park, go to the swings, and, finally, get on a swing). You can use each step until the exposure becomes easy; that’s when you know it’s time to move to the next rung on the ladder.

6. Compassion

Watching a child suffer from anxiety can be painful, frustrating, and confusing. There is not one adult that hasn’t wondered at one time or another what has caused the child’s anxiety, but research shows that anxiety is often the result of multiple factors (eg: genes, temperament, environmental factors – who or what they live with, expectations, attention/attachment issues, past traumatic events, etc.). Please keep in mind, that whatever has triggered a child’s anxiety, we can help them overcome it. Toward the goal of a healthier life, practice self-compassion and compassion towards others. Remember, often no-one is to blame. It’s time to let go of criticism and self-criticism, and be a role-model of kindness and compassion.