

Calming Your Anxious Child



Supporting Your Child

Here are 9 ideas straight from GoZen that parents of anxious children can try right away:

1: Stop Reassuring Your Child

Your child worries. You know there is nothing to worry about, so you say, "Trust me. There's nothing to worry about." Done and done, right? We all wish it were that simple. Why does your reassurance fall on deaf ears? It's actually not the ears causing the issue. Your 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 your 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 called 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 - once your child is calm, it's time to figure out possible solutions.

Let Go - Let go of your guilt; you are an amazing parent giving your child the tools to manage his or her 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 your 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. Worry rings an alarm in our system and helps us survive danger. Teach your kids that worry 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 can. Create a worry character for your child. In *GoZen*, they created Widdle the Worrier. Widdle personifies anxiety. Widdle lives in the area of the brain responsible for protecting us when we're in danger. Of course, sometimes Widdle gets a little out of control and when that happens, we have to talk some sense into Widdle. 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 child can use on his or her own at any time.



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6: Help Them Go From What If to What is

You may not know this, but humans are capable of time travel. In fact, mentally we spend a lot of time in the future. For someone experiencing anxiety, this type of mental time travel can exacerbate the worry. A typical time traveler asks what-if questions such as, “What if I can’t open my locker and I miss class?” “What if Suzy doesn’t talk to me today?”

7: Avoid Avoiding Everything that Causes Anxiety

Does your child want to avoid social events, dogs, school, planes, or basically any situation that causes anxiety? As a parent, do you help him or her do so? Of course! This is natural. The flight part of the flight-fight-freeze response urges your child to escape the threatening situation. Unfortunately, in the long run, avoidance makes anxiety worse.

So what’s the alternative? Try a method called laddering. Kids are able to manage their worry by breaking it down into manageable chunks. Laddering uses this chunking concept and gradual exposure to reach a goal.

Let’s say your 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 (i.e., go to the edge of the park, then walk into the park, go to the swings, and, finally, get on a swing). You can do each step until the exposure becomes too easy; that’s when you know it’s time to move to the next rung on the ladder.



8: Help Them Work Through a Checklist

What do trained pilots do when they face an emergency? They don't wing it; they refer to their emergency checklists. Even with years of training, every pilot works through a checklist because, when in danger, sometimes it's hard to think clearly.

When kids face anxiety they feel the same way. Why not create a checklist so they have a step-by-step method to calm down? What do you want them to do when they first feel anxiety coming on? If breathing helps them, then the first step is to pause and breathe. Next, they can evaluate the situation.

9: Practice Self-Compassion

Watching your child suffer from anxiety can be painful, frustrating, and confusing. Research shows that anxiety is often the result of multiple factors such as genes, brain physiology, temperament, environmental factors, past traumatic events. Please keep in mind, you did not cause your child's anxiety, but you can help him or her to overcome it.

Toward the goal of a healthier life for the whole family, practice self-compassion. Remember, you're not alone, and you're not to blame. It's time to let go of debilitating self-criticism. You are your child's champion.



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Adapted from material by Woodburn Press.