Tips for parents to support a child with anxiety

What is Anxiety?
Anxiety is a negative emotion where children are likely to feel nervous, restless or tense. They will sometime feel that something awful is about to happen and this can be accompanied by increased heart rate, rapid breathing and sweating.

High levels of anxiety can reduce your child's capacity to respond appropriately or effectively to stressful situations, or even normal routine activities. A highly anxious child might feel panicky and try to avoid anything that might trigger these negative feelings, such as being alone, going to school, talking in front of a group. For some children and young people, feelings of nervousness and worry can have a significant impact on the way they perform at school, on their ability to make or maintain friends, and on their family life. Children who experience significant difficulties with anxiety can generally be described in the following ways:

- They dislike trying new things
- They tend to dislike change or taking risks
- They have a tendency to highlight the negative consequences of any situation, e.g., “all the kids will hate me”
- They avoid situations or objects they fear, e.g., a child with social anxiety will avoid attending parties or participating in groups
- Physical complaints are common. As some children don’t have the vocabulary or awareness to describe their anxiety, they may express it through physical symptoms such as feeling sick, having a lump in their throat, or sore shoulders from muscle tension.

The following three steps can assist you to help your child with anxiety:

1. **Encourage them to talk about their anxiety** - Share the things that made you anxious as a child and ask them what they find worrying. By modelling your own calm acceptance of anxiety you will be assisting them to remain calm about theirs.

1. **Teach your child about anxiety and its purpose** - Educate yourself about anxiety and its adaptive role in helping humans survive (flight-fight-freeze). Explain the physical changes in the human body when danger is perceived (sweaty hands, blood to extremities, increased heartbeat, rapid and shallow breathing etc.). By explaining anxiety in this way it makes it more normal, and will help your child to identify and understand the way their body reacts when anxious. The ‘how to manage anxiety’ self-help guide has good information that you can work through with your child. https://www.heysigmund.com/ is also a useful website to read about anxiety, and how to discuss this with your child.

1. **Help your child to recognise their anxiety and to develop ways to manage it** - Ask your child to draw a sketch of their body and mark on it where they are most aware of the anxious feelings. Teach them ways to work with their anxiety. For example a young child might learn to say: "That's just 'Mr Worry' telling me not to do that. I don't want to miss out so 'Mr Worry' you can just be quiet". Or a teenager might liken their worrying thoughts to a radio with the volume turned up high, and learn to manage it by turning the volume down. The Mindshift app (suitable for iPhones and iPads) is designed to help teens and young adults identify their anxiety, and ways to cope.

Other things you can do to help:

- Encourage good eating (reduce caffeinated, high sugar drinks and foods), regular exercise, hobbies, sufficient sleep and connection with friends. When young people are well-rested and relaxed, they will be in a better mental state to handle fears or worries.

- Let your child know who they can call on for support if needed. This will make them feel less anxious about the future.
- Visit your GP if you feel that your child's anxiety is affecting their life to a significant degree, and they might benefit from the involvement of professionals.

When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning parents can unintentionally make their child's anxiety worse. It happens when parents, anticipating their child's fears, try to offer them protection. Here are pointers for helping children escape the cycle of anxiety.

1. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.

None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help them overcome anxiety isn't to try to remove what triggers it. Rather, it is to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they are anxious. In doing so the anxiety will diminish over time.

2. Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious.

Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety in the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation becomes upset and starts to cry (not to be manipulative, but just because that's how she feels) and her parents whisk her out of the situation, or remove the thing she's afraid of, she has learned that unhelpful coping mechanism. That cycle then has the potential to repeat itself and become a well-established pattern of avoidance.

3. Express positive—but realistic—expectations.

You can't promise a child that their fears are unrealistic. They may fail a test, they may fall when ice skating, or another child may be unkind to them. They need to know that sometimes disappointing/upsetting things may happen – although often the outcome can be more positive than they may expect. Express confidence that they are going to be okay, they will be able to manage it, and that, as they face their fears, the intensity of anxiety will subside over time. This allows children to trust that you have a realistic expectation of the world, and that you have faith in their capacity to cope with challenges.

4. Respect their feelings, but don't empower them.

It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. So, if a child is terrified about going to the doctor because she's due for a vaccination, you don't want to belittle her fears, but neither do you want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic**,** help her understand what she's anxious about, and encourage her to feel that she can face her fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

5. Don't ask leading questions.

Encourage your child to talk about her feelings, but try not to ask leading questions— "Are you anxious about the big test? Are you worried about the science fair?" To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: "How are you feeling about the science fair?"

6. Don't reinforce your child's fears.

Don't allow the tone of voice or body language increase your child's anxieties, suggesting "Maybe this *is* something that you should be afraid of." Let's say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. The next time she's around a dog, you might be anxious about how she will respond, and you might unintentionally send a message that she *should*, indeed, be worried.

7. Encourage the child to tolerate her anxiety.

Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what she wants or needs to do. Encourage her to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the "habituation curve"—it will drop over time as she continues to have contact with the source of her anxiety. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that's how we get over our fears.

8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.

When we're afraid of something, the hardest time is really *before* we do it. So another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory period. If a child is nervous about going to a doctor's appointment, you don't want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go; that's likely to get your child more keyed up. Try to shorten that period to a minimum wherever possible. On the other hand, do not eliminate the anticipatory

period altogether, as to spring something on a child unexpectedly can also cause high levels of anxiety. Making things predictable can help lower anxiety – so it is really about finding the right balance for your child.

9. Think things through with the child.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true—how would she handle it? A child who is anxious about separating from her parents might worry about what would happen if they didn't come to pick her up. You can ask a series of questions like: If your mum doesn't come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? "Well I would tell the coach my mum's not here." And what do you think the coach would do? "Well he would call my mum. Or he would wait with me." Working through a fear in this way will help a child realise that the worst is not actually that bad, and helps them realise they are capable of finding solutions – thus giving them a sense of agency. Having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

Showing your child that you also experience anxiety sometimes, and how you manage and cope with it can make a real impact on their ability to manage their own anxiety. Let them see how you tolerate the uncomfortable feelings of anxiety, talk about how you've learnt that it reduces over time (i.e. it never stays at that peak level of discomfort) and with repeated experiences of the situation that acts as a stressor. Talk about your own experience of avoiding an anxiety-provoking situation and how that didn't help, and what you missed out on by taking this avoidance tactic. Tell them how good you felt when you got through your anxiety, and the benefits this brought.

Expectations of your child

It's important that you have the same expectations of your anxious child that you would of another child (e.g. to go to birthday parties, make decisions, talk to adults). However, understand that the pace will need to be slower and there is a process involved in meeting this end goal. You can help your child break down big tasks into smaller steps that your child can accomplish (e.g. first go to the party with your child and agree to stay as long as your child is interacting with others; next time stay for the first half hour). You can help role-play or act out possible ways your child could handle a difficult situation. Saying it out loud makes children more confident and more likely to try the strategy when they are alone.

Build your child's personal strength

It's important to praise your child for facing challenges, trying something new or brave behaviour. There is a lot you can do to help build your child's competence. Search to find avenues where your child can show he is good at something (e.g. music, art, sports).

Letting your child learn to do things on his/her own

While tempting, it is best not to take over or do it for your child. While this might help your child feel better right now, the message your child is getting is that you don't believe they can do it. Then your child will start to think the same way about him or herself. Try not to get caught continually reassuring your child that everything will be okay. Teach your child to answer her own questions and provide reassurance to herself. You can model how you think through and respond to your child's questions.

Helping your child handle his own feelings

It is okay to let your child experience some anxiety. Your child needs to know that anxiety is not dangerous but something they can cope with. You can let your child know all feelings are alright and it is okay to say what you feel. Anxious children sometimes have a hard time expressing strong emotions like anger or sadness because they are afraid people will be angry with them. It's also important to take time for yourself even if your child wants to be with you at all times. You are modelling for your child that everyone needs some time to themselves, and that you trust others to take care of your child, even if they don't feel the same yet.

Passing on your fears

Try to keep your fears to yourself and, as best you can, present a positive or at least neutral description of a situation. Let them know that the world is generally a safe, kind place.

Working together as parents

If you have a partner/spouse/other key family who care for your child, it is important to work with them to have an agreed way of handling your child's anxiety that you both feel comfortable with. It is very important that one adult not be "too easy" because the other adult "pushes your child too much."

Book recommendations

Help there's an alarm bell going off in my head! by K Aspden.

'Overcoming your child's fears and worries' by Cresswell and Willetts, from the CBT based Overcoming series.