

Anxiety Relief for Children

Young children can show their anxiety in many different ways. Some children appear shy and reserved, and others are more controlling or “bossy.” Common symptoms of anxiety in young children include:

- Tantrums
- Rigid or controlling behavior (needing things to be a certain way)
- Physical symptoms (tummy ache, headache)
- Discomfort, avoidance, freezing or withdrawing in certain situations
- Excessive shyness, refusing to talk
- Retreating to parents or hiding
- Difficulty sleeping independently
- Difficulty separating from a caregiver or being alone
- Nightmares
- Asking frequent reassurance questions
- Irritability, moodiness
- Difficulty paying attention
- Tight muscles or difficulty relaxing

Why do we get anxious? We all experience anxiety sometimes, and experiencing some anxiety is normal. Many young children have fears of the dark or monsters or have anxiety when they separate from a caregiver. When anxiety is mild, it can help us avoid danger or motivate us to prepare for an upcoming challenge. But when we have too much anxiety, it can cause distress and get in the way of doing things we want to do. It is important to remember that even when our anxiety is significant, it is not dangerous to be anxious--it is just uncomfortable.

Why do some children develop anxiety disorders? It can be different for each person. Anxiety is partly inherited through our genetics, so many children with anxiety have other relatives who have anxiety, too. Environmental factors play a role as well. Stress at home is often unavoidable, but it can contribute to anxiety for some children. It can be especially difficult when children feel their emotional reactions to stress or other difficult situations are wrong or bad.

What makes anxiety get better or worse? When we avoid things we're afraid of, our fears grow bigger. So when parents are more overprotective, their children tend to avoid more and may grow more anxious over time. Anxiety can decrease or get better when we help children talk about their feelings, provide warm and kind support, and, most importantly, help them face their fears.

Here are some strategies you can use with your child when they are anxious:

Expand your child's emotional vocabulary.

Show your child that it's okay to talk about feelings by narrating your feelings and encouraging them to talk about theirs. Here are some ways to help your child find the right feeling words:

- 1) Create a list of emotion words together or draw about feelings.
- 2) Find pictures of people showing emotions and label them together.
- 3) If it's hard for your child to talk about their feelings, try to explain why one of their friends, stuffed animals, or other characters feels the same way.

Validate feelings.

When we can label and understand our feelings, they feel more manageable. Try to respond to your child's feelings with empathy and reflective statements. You might say, "It can feel scary to sleep in your bed at night," or "I wonder if you felt mad or scared when your brother hit you." When children feel like you understand how they feel, they feel more connected to you, and the intensity of the feeling typically fades.

Remember brave times.

Help your child remember times when they were brave and remind them that they can be both anxious and brave at the same time.

Sensory play.

The mind and body are interconnected, and sometimes we can calm our mind by engaging our physical senses. Sensory play can also help keep a child engaged in an environment they want to avoid, and it can support self-control, cooperation, communication, and other abilities. If you notice that your child is feeling anxious, try engaging them in sensory play with water, sand, finger paint, playdough, putty, glitter, music, or other materials that engage their senses!

Relaxation Exercises.

There are times when our bodies have fear responses, even when we are safe. Relaxation exercises can help us bring our bodies to a calmer state. See below for some strategies you and your child can try.

Relaxation Exercises:

Exercise 1: 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding

Encourage your child to look around the room with you and say five things that they can see (a pencil, a coffee mug, furniture). Feel your surroundings and ask your child to name four things they can touch (clothes, the floor). Next, name three things you can hear (people talking in another room, birds chirping, a car). Now, name two things you can smell (the scent of your shampoo, a scented candle). Lastly, name one thing you can taste (your toothpaste from brushing your teeth earlier or what you ate last). A fun alternative way to do this exercise is to name things around you that are each color of the rainbow!

5-4-3-2-1 GROUNDING



Exercise 2: 5 Finger Breathing

Begin by holding one hand out in front of you. With your other hand, slowly trace your pointer finger along your thumb. As you trace up the thumb, breathe in slowly. Follow the line of your thumb, and as you go down the other side, slowly exhale. Continue tracing each finger, breathing in slowly as you trace up toward the tip of the finger and exhaling slowly as you trace back down to the base of your finger.

5 FINGER BREATHING



Exercise 3: Guided Imagery

Find a time when your child can lay down for 5-10 minutes. During your child's bedtime routine may work well. Choose a script or recording. There are many options online (search for "Guided meditation for kids"). Read through the script slowly and with a calm, soothing voice. A set of guided imagery recordings can be found on the [CHOC website here](#).

Here are some more *Tips from Zero to Three* for [responding to your child's fears](#) and [managing challenging behavior](#).

Parenting strategies that can be helpful for anxious children:

Try to help your child stay in the situation that is making them anxious. The more they stay in it and experience it, the more your child's anxiety will decrease. This process is known as "exposure" and is very effective at reducing anxiety. When your child can face their fears and realize that situations causing anxiety are not dangerous, your child will feel more comfortable and confident in that situation over time. This process should be gradual. For example, if your child is afraid of the dark, help them face their fears by sitting in the dark for a few minutes - long enough for you to notice your child's anxiety decrease - and then turn the lights on and praise them for their bravery. Try for a few more minutes next time.

Remember that facing fears fosters independence. While it may feel uncomfortable to see your child in distress while facing their fears, the sense of independence your child will feel as they develop their skills will last longer than their temporary distress.

Find a balance between warm and kind and strong and in charge. When your child is anxious, you may find yourself leaning too much in one direction. Maybe you show so much warmth and kindness that you allow your child to avoid scary things. Or perhaps you feel so strong and in charge that you forget to consider how your child might be feeling in the moment. Children benefit most from parents who can find a balance between the two. Be present for your child and attend to their feelings while also teaching them that we sometimes have to do scary things.



Practice self-care. It can feel challenging as a parent to see how your child's anxiety impacts them. Using your self-care strategies can help decrease any feelings of anxiety that arise in you. You can even practice the skills described above with your child! As you see your child's anxiety decrease, your anxiety will decrease too.

Notice the times when your child is brave and enjoy watching their bravery grow over time. Pay attention to the moments when your child does something hard or faces a fear and praise them for their bravery. Let them know how you felt watching them try something new or scary.

Model calmness and bravery. When you are in anxiety-provoking situations, show your child how to be calm and brave. Speak in a clear and steady voice and let your child know that you are brave enough to do things that scare you. Your child will see how brave you are and aspire to be just like you.