



# Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Anxiety

## An important note to readers:

The following approaches have been proven to be highly effective in navigating anxiety in children and adolescents. While these approaches and ways of doing things are “ideal”, it is not possible or realistic to do things perfectly and without making mistakes in everyday life. Keep this in mind as you read through these suggestions and attempt to implement the strategies. Be patient with yourself. Be patient with the anxious child or adolescent.

And above all, when you know better, do better.

## Helpful Approaches

### Reward Brave, Non-Anxious Behaviour

Look for examples of the child/adolescent being brave, no matter how small, and verbally acknowledge and reward the child/adolescent for coping. This helps to build their sense of agency and ability to cope. It also increases the likelihood of the child/adolescent facing their fears again in the future.

### Tips for Using Rewards and Verbal Praise

- Acknowledge and reward the child’s efforts regardless of the outcome. If the child tries and isn’t successful, reward their effort anyways. Rewarding a child only for their success can lead them to feel less confident in their ability to cope. They may also avoid attempting to cope in anxiety-provoking situations if success doesn’t seem guaranteed. This is a pathway to perfectionism.
- Even small rewards that are meaningful can be effective. Rewards can be tangible (e.g., treats, small toys, stickers, etc.) or activity/social-based (e.g., verbal or social praise, time earned for preferred activities such as an extra 10 mins of screen time, staying up 10 mins later, extra play time, one-on-one time with a caregiver, etc.).
- Rewards are most effective when implemented Quickly and Immediately following the child/adolescent’s effort to be brave. Delaying a reward for multiple days or a week may be too far in the future to be sufficiently motivating.
- Rewards are most effective when delivered Consistently to maintain the child’s motivation.
- Provide rewards that are easy and realistic to deliver on the spot. Verbal praise/acknowledgment is something we always have available to use.

### Tips for Giving Verbal Praise

- Clear, specific and concrete verbal praise is more effective than general praise. This lets the child know specifically what they did well so they can try it again.

**Good but Vague:** “good job”, “nice work”, “good try”, “way to go”

**Better:** Specific and Clear: “I like how hard you tried today when you said hi to Mrs. Nottingham. I was proud of you for being so brave. You said hi even though you were feeling shy”; “Great job raising your hand today in math. I love when you share your answers with the class”; “I know you were afraid to go to Sam’s party. I’m proud of you for being brave and going. You deserved to see your friends and have fun.”

### Help Prevent Avoidance

When children consistently avoid feared situations, they will struggle to learn that they can cope with their worry. Through direct experiences with feared situations, children will learn:

1. That the situation/person/thing they fear and want to avoid is not as scary or dangerous as they initially believed.
2. They are stronger and braver than they realized.
3. That they can cope even when it doesn’t feel comfortable.
4. That worry eventually goes away.
5. That worry doesn’t hurt you even though it doesn’t feel good.
6. That worry is something they can learn how to cope with.
7. That worry doesn’t have to stop us from doing things we need and want to do.



### Tips:

- Don't force the child to do something they may not currently be able to do (e.g., facing a fear that is too intense 7+/10, trying a new sport when their motor skills are weak, talking to unfamiliar people when they don't have sufficiently-developed conversation skills, etc.). This can unintentionally set the child up to fail and may strengthen their initial anxiety.
- Don't force the child to do something that is terrifying for him/her (fear thermometer ratings of 7+/10). Imagine being forced to do something that terrifies you with minimal/no warning, without a plan to manage it, or feeling like you have no idea how to cope. This can strengthen fear and avoidance.
- Children manage best when encouraged to face their fears gradually, building up the degree of difficulty. This makes it more likely the child will be willing to try things that are difficult yet manageable for them. A gradual approach decreases resistance, reduces feelings of overwhelm (i.e, fight-flight-freeze), makes it more likely they will be able to cope now, and be more willing to face their fears in the future.

### Prompt and Guide Older Children and Adolescents How to Cope Constructively

- Encourage the child to think for themselves in how to handle different anxiety-provoking situations. Initially you may need to provide ideas and options to choose from until they have learned how to do this on their own. Remind the child about strategies they have successfully used in the past. Use cognitive behavioural therapy approaches as a guide for this (see resource ideas below).

### Model Brave, Non-Anxious Behaviour

- Children learn how to behave by observing others. Adults can introduce difficult and anxiety-provoking situations and model how to effectively solve problems and cope while talking aloud how to cope. This normalizes problems and teaches children realistic ways of coping.
- Pay attention to your own ways of dealing with anxiety and stress and show the child how to use the tools you are encouraging them to use by modeling how to use them. Peers and siblings can also be helpful, positive role models for coping.

### Be Aware of Your Own Emotions and What You Are Communicating

- Emotions are contagious (both positive and negative ones)! By calming our own negative emotions, we can share our calm and help children cope in challenging situations. Consider how you feel when you are struggling to manage a problem and someone gets frustrated with you. It is very difficult to feel calm when someone gets irritated, angry and impatient with us. No one ever feels calmed by being told "You need to calm down" when we are upset. Don't practice what doesn't work to calm you down.
- It is important for children to have awareness of their feelings (both positive and negative ones), and to be able to express their emotions and communicate how they are feeling. This is foundational for healthy emotional and psychological wellbeing, and interpersonal relationships.
- As adults we teach and model how to manage and respond to emotions through our behaviours. If we yell, use put downs or shame, shut down or avoid when we are upset, children in our presence will learn to use those same coping strategies. Conversely, if when angry we say "I am really upset I need to go for a walk to calm my body," or when anxious we say "I'm feeling nervous but I know I can do it. I'm going to take some deep breaths to calm my brain," children will learn that they can experience strong/difficult emotions, yet cope in constructive ways.

### Normalize Struggle

Struggle is a normal and unavoidable human experience. Every human on the planet experiences anxiety from time to time. Anxiety is our brain's way of protecting us from harm by warning us of potential danger (even if that danger isn't real). By acknowledging that it's normal to worry, and that it doesn't mean there's anything "wrong with you," it can reduce shame, fear, dread and avoidance of anxiety.

### Self-Awareness and Education

Educate yourself, and teach children and adolescents how and why we experience anxiety and stress. Learn about the role of our brain and nervous system in the experience of anxiety symptoms (fight-flight-freeze response). Learn and talk about effective ways of coping with distress (e.g., mindfulness, exercise, listening to music, etc.) and practice these strategies.



## Unhelpful Approaches

### Excessively Reassuring the Child

Providing children with encouragement, comfort, security and reassurance, particularly when they are afraid, uncertain or hurt, is essential in promoting healthy development and a sense of security. Over time, it is also important that children and adolescents learn how to develop their own coping skills including comforting and soothing themselves. When facing fear or uncertainty, attempting to shield a child from any discomfort and reassuring them that “there is nothing to be afraid of,” without also giving helping them learn how to cope and face their fears, can result in them believing they don’t have the capacity to cope without protection and reassurance from others.

### Being Too Directive

When a child is distressed and extremely anxious, some adults may intervene by taking over and directing the child’s behaviours. They may tell the child exactly what to do, how to behave, and/or what to say including speaking for the child when they appear shy. Although in the short-term this strategy may appear to reduce the child’s fear, reliance on adult direction can actually serve as a form of avoidance. The result is the child isn’t provided with an opportunity to learn how to cope on their own when someone always steps in and copes for them.

#### Tips:

Don’t take over and do/say too much for the child. Although the child will need support and guidance to cope, they can only learn that situations or things are not dangerous or something to be feared when they have the opportunity to experience to cope with the situation.

### Permitting or Encouraging Avoidance

Anxious children will attempt to avoid situations/activities that they fear or worry about. Too much protection and/or rescuing can convey a message that there are many dangers to look out for and avoid, and that the child is not capable of dealing with situations themselves. Consistent and persistent avoidance leads to a cycle of avoidance: when the anxiety-provoking situation is avoided, anxiety initially decreases and relief occurs. However, once faced with the situation in the future, anxiety increases, making avoidance more urgent and desired, ultimately making the anxiety even more difficult to manage. Facing fears is not an easy task. A child will need guidance and support with gradually facing their fears.

### Shaming, Blaming, and Becoming Impatient with the Child

It can be frustrating, disruptive and exhausting dealing with a child who experiences frequent and/or significant anxiety. It can feel like the child is deliberately clinging to his or her anxiety and that he or she could do it if they just tried harder. Becoming angry and shaming a child who is struggling with anxiety can lead them to feel less confident in themselves, and more fearful and dependent.

#### Tips:

Ask yourself what you are asking the child to do. Imagine having to confront your worst fears ... that is exactly what you may be asking the child to do.

Remind yourself the child is likely doing the best they know how to do right now, and that they need help and guidance from you to learn new and more effective anxiety-management skills.



## Helpful Resources:

Anxiety Canada:

[www.anxietycanada.com](http://www.anxietycanada.com)

Anxiety Disorders Association of Manitoba:

[www.adam.mb.ca](http://www.adam.mb.ca)

eMentalHealth:

[www.ementalhealth.ca](http://www.ementalhealth.ca)

Wellness Together Canada:

[www.wellnesstogether.ca/en-CA](http://www.wellnesstogether.ca/en-CA)

Kids Help Phone:

[www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

We're Here to Help:

[www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)

Mindful: Mindfulness for Kids:

[www.mindful.org](http://www.mindful.org)

### **Video:**

Anxiety and the Brain: Fight-Flight-Freeze Response: Youtube – Brain Basics: Anxiety for Kids with Lee Constable

### **Book:**

The Anxiety Workbook for Kids: Take Charge of Fears and Worries Using the Gift of Imagination (R Alter, 2016)