

Jon Dillow Counseling

Counseling, Coaching, and Seminars

Helping a child with anxiety:

The following suggestions can give you as a parent some approaches that might be helpful with your child. As you employ these strategies, realize they aren't a substitute for the help of a trained therapist who works with children. If using these strategies doesn't bring significant improvement consider seeking help from a trained therapist.

1. Seek Calm Before Solutions: When highly anxious a person is in flight/fight mode and their prefrontal cortex, the place in the brain where higher order thinking occurs is offline. If the child is anxious, they may want to listen to you, but may simply not be able to. The better response is to first help the child calm down, bring their brain back online, so you can then engage with them.

One approach is the "FEEL" method:

F - Freeze: Pause, take some deep breaths with your child. This can help bring the prefrontal cortex back on line

E - Emphathize: Let your child know you understand anxiety is scary and that they are truly afraid.

E - Evaluate: Once the child is calm then you can start thinking of solutions. Don't be surprised if you have to go back to the Freeze step as anxiety remounts.

L - Let Go: Let go of your guilt as a parent. You likely aren't the cause/source of the anxiety. The fact that your taking the time to learn about these techniques shows you're a good parent who loves their child.

2. Highlight Why Worrying is Good: Helping the child see that anxiety is a normal part of life and one of the defense mechanism our body uses can demystify and normalize anxiety. You may fear that this will give permission for great anxiety but generally this allows a person to put anxiety in it's proper place. This is key though, as you tell your child that anxiety is a normal defense system, just like a home alarm, *sometimes there are false alarms*. Part of learning to cope with anxiety is discerning when there is a false alarm.

3. Bring your child's worry to life: Personifying the anxiety can help a child differentiate themselves from the worry. You can create your own character with a stuffed animal from the store. You might name the stuffed animal "Waldo the worrier" The value of personifying anxiety in this way is it separates it from the child, setting the stage for the child to reason with the anxiety as opposed to them being the anxiety. You can continue to use the language of the

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false alarm as mentioned in tip 2. Saying something like, “I wonder if Waldo is calling a false alarm right now?” can be a way to start a helpful discussion with your child. “Let’s talk with Waldo and see if we can’t understand what’s going on.”

4. Teach your child to be a thought detective: “The best remedy for distorted thinking is not positive thinking; its accurate thinking.” One method of checking our thinking is called the “3C’s”

Catch your thoughts: “Imagine every thought you have floats above your head in a bubble (like what you see in a comic strip). Now, catch one of the worried thoughts like ‘No one at school likes me’”

Collect Evidence: Teach your child not to make judgements on what to worry about based on feelings. Feelings are good but they aren’t facts. Again, you can continue to use the false alarm analogy. If our smoke alarms went off accidentally we might have feelings of fear but the fact might be that there’s nothing to fear except dad burning the toast :) Help your child collect evidence, positive and negative to support or negate the anxiety. Denying that there might be some rationale to be anxious, e.g. I was stung by a bee once and it hurt, won’t help a child overcome their fear of bees. Acknowledge the true reasons for the anxiety is a first step towards helping the child find solutions, e.g. Yes, I remember you were stung by a bee, it hurt a lot. Do you remember how long it hurt? What happened after? That’s right, we were back playing in just a few minutes. What might it take for you to have the courage to make it through that if it happened again.

Challenge your thoughts: Help your child learn to interrogate or debate the anxious thoughts once she has gathered the evidence. She could even picture or play out (depending on age) the conversation with Waldo the Worrier.

5. Allow them time to worry: Setting aside 10-15 minutes each day for your child to worry can help lessen anxiety. It teaches a child to put anxiety in a place, one with boundaries, rather than allowing it to run free throughout their day. You can have a worry box and stack of paper for this time. The child takes 10-15 minutes to write out their worries and then puts them in the box for the day, leaving them behind. This is also a good chance to practice prayer and releasing of anxiety to the Lord. In the beginning, do this activity with your child, helping them gain the skills needed. It allows you to bond with them and coach them in working through their anxiety.

6. Help them go from What If to What Is: Practicing mindfulness, living in the present moment, rather than an imagined future of some potential negative event lessen anxiety. Deep breathing exercises can help the child return to the “what is” present. Talking to your child about Matthew 6:33-34, that each day has enough trouble of its own, so don’t worry about tomorrow but just focus on this day, can help the child stay in the today and trust God with the tomorrow.

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7. Avoid Avoiding Everything that Causes Anxiety: Instead of steering clear of any anxious situations/stimuli help your child take small progressive steps towards the anxiety. This is called “laddering”. Like rungs on a ladder, you help your child face the anxiety one small step at a time. Each step takes them “up” the ladder and on to more challenging actions. For example, if your child is afraid to go on the swing at the park, first sit in the car in the parking lot at the park, then walk around the edge of the park, next walk onto the park, when ready, walk up to the swings, finally sit on a swing. Each step is done slowly and progressive steps occur once the child is calm and ready. As you Ladder you may still need to employ the “**FEEL**”, and “**3C’s**”

8. Help them work through a check list: When confronted with anxiety it is easy to panic and stop thinking clearly. Giving your child a check list of how to respond in anxious moments can help them not panic and ramp up but instead empower them to use techniques to calm down. A few things to put on the check list could be:

- Take ten slow deep breaths
- Say a prayer, handing this anxiety over to God
- Ask yourself if this is a “false alarm”
- Remind yourself that the anxiety will pass