

5 Ways to Help Reduce Your Child's Anxiety

1. Start with the Basics

Anxiety is a survival mechanism. Our “antenna” (anxiety) pop up to detect “danger” and keep us alive until the danger passes. However, when a child has excessive worry, their “antenna” is often stuck in the “up” position. Because of this, they often perceive non-threatening situations to be dangerous. Functioning in this increased state of emotion can be exhausting, overwhelming, and at times, scary. It can be helpful to have your child draw or write about their worries to help identify them, begin to understand them, and then develop skills to better manage them. It is also helpful for your child to learn how their body feels, physically, when they begin to experience anxiety. Knowing when their body is beginning to feel anxious helps children (and adults) to apply positive coping skills to manage these feelings at the start, before they become overwhelming.

2. Validate Their Worries

Acknowledge your child's feelings and work with them to find solutions to the problems they are worried about. Rather than saying “You're fine! Don't worry about it!”, say “You seem worried. What's on your mind?” This opens the door for them to discuss their emotions and feelings with you. Then, help your child problem solve, but do not solve the problem for them. Help them to identify their own solutions to the problems. If they can come up with solutions on their own, that's wonderful! If not, provide some possible solutions and ask them to pick which one they think would work best.

3. Manage Your Own Anxiety*

When your child sees you manage your anxiety in healthy ways, it provides them with a model to follow. Your children respond to your cues. If they see that you are anxious, they are more likely to be anxious. However, be honest. Let them know that you are anxious or worried. Allow for your child to see that worry and stress is a normal, natural feeling. Then show them the healthy ways that you are managing your stress or anxiety. Help them learn the skills so that they can adapt them and utilize them in their own lives.

4. Focus on the Positives

Children with anxiety often get stuck in the patterns of negative thoughts. Have your child identify the positives of a situation rather than focusing on the negatives. For example, at a restaurant, having food allergies allows you to have a personalized, custom meal, made fresh, JUST FOR YOU every time; you often get to meet the chef who is taking the extra time to prepare your meal (some may even allow you to tour the kitchen if you call and ask ahead of time); and you often get to pick the restaurant of your choice!

5. Empower, Don't Avoid

It's so much easier to leave or avoid situations that make you afraid. However, these behaviors allow for the maintenance of the anxiety and often increase it. It also communicates to your child that when they're feeling anxious, the solution to these feelings is to avoid or leave a situation, or to ignore the feeling altogether. Avoidance does not allow your child to learn the skills needed to navigate the feelings of anxiety, to gain confidence, and to empower themselves to overcome their fears. If your child is anxious about going to eat in a restaurant, make them part of the preparation process (if it is age-appropriate). Have them call the restaurant with you to speak with the manager before going to discuss kitchen protocols to avoid cross-contact. Role play ordering the food at the restaurant. Provide a script of questions for your child to use when dining out with ways to ask about ingredients and kitchen protocols. Empower your child by helping them to learn and practice self-advocacy skills while you are there to guide them through each step of the process.

*(If you feel you are struggling to manage your own fears or anxieties, please consider reaching out to a counseling professional for support. You can locate food allergy-knowledgeable counselors on the Food Allergy Counselor Directory at: <http://www.foodallergycounselor.com/directory.html>)