

Learn how to manage the symptoms of anxiety in children with these simple tips for helping your child cope with their anxiety

Article adapted from

[Katie Hurley, LCSW](#)

When children are chronically anxious, it's natural for parents to seek strategies to fix or stop the anxiety. It's very difficult for parents to see a young child suffer from anxiety, and many well-meaning parents unknowingly exacerbate the anxiety by attempting to protect their children from experiencing negative emotions.

The goal of treatment for anxiety is to help children learn to manage their emotional responses to their triggers. Avoiding triggers won't help children learn to cope, and not all triggers can be avoided. In fact, though avoidance might help children feel better in the short-term, it can amplify the fears over time. Children need to learn how to tolerate their feelings of anxiety and to develop coping strategies to manage it.

All children are different and what works well for one child might not work for another. Learning to manage symptoms of anxiety and cope with triggers takes time and practice. Parents can help their children by trying some of these strategies at home.

Practice Relaxation Strategies

Children need to learn how to regulate both their emotional and physical responses (they become intertwined) when they go into fight-or-flight mode. Here are some techniques that may help:

- Deep breathing:** Teaching your children to “breathe the rainbow” by taking slow deep breaths and thinking about their favourite things to match each color helps them slow their heart rate and relax their muscles. Practice this strategy when calm to increase effectiveness when anxious.
- Progressive muscle relaxation:** Most children tense their muscles when feeling anxious. Many even hold their breath. A simple two-step process helps children learn to use their muscles to relieve the physical stress they experience when anxious. 1)Tense a specific muscle group (e.g. arms and hands or neck and shoulders) and hold for five seconds and 2) release the muscle group and notice how you feel. Work head-to-toe to better understand all of the muscles affected by anxiety. With practice, children can learn to do this at school.
- Create a relaxation kit:** Fill a box with relaxing activities chosen by your child and create a relaxation place somewhere in your home. You might include music, colouring books, fidget toys, a mini sandbox, clay, books, and stuffed animals.

Write It Out

Writing about worries helps children learn to vent their anxious feelings. Anxious children have a tendency to internalize their anxious thoughts for long periods of time. Often, they don't want to burden others with their worries. Dedicating time to getting those feelings out for fifteen minutes each day helps children learn to work through their worries. Try to do one of these exercises at the same time each day (an hour before bedtime is a great timeframe as anxiety tends to spike at night):

- Write and tear:** Have your child write or draw her worries on a piece of paper, read them to you, and then tear them up and throw them away for the night. This helps children say their worries out loud and let go of them.
- Worry journal:** Keeping a worry journal helps children see how their anxious thoughts improve over time. Writing the worries of the day followed by one positive thought helps break the cycle of negative thinking that can exacerbate anxiety.
- Worry box:** This is a great tool to use before bed. Have your child decorate an old tissue box with her/his favourite things or cover it with stickers. Help them to write their worries of the day and place them in the box one-by-one, after they share them with you. Take the box to your room for the night and offer to hold them for them.

Talk Back

When children learn that they have the power to talk back to their worry brains, they feel empowered to cope with anxiety-producing stressors. Teach your child that anxious thoughts make us feel powerless, but talking back to anxious thoughts gives us control over the situation.

- Boss back:** Have your child practice saying, “You’re not in charge of me, worry brain! I know I can handle this!” Help your child create specific scripts to target certain triggers.
- Thought stopping:** When intrusive thoughts overwhelm children, they go into fight-or-flight mode. Teach your child to stop anxious thoughts before they snowball by saying, “No! That’s not true!” This technique interrupts the anxious thought cycle.
- Create a character:** One thing that helps young children is creating a character to represent the anxiety. It’s easier to talk back to a character they can visualize in the moment. Childhood anxiety can feel overwhelming for both the child and the parent, but it is treatable. If your child’s anxiety is pervasive and negatively affecting her ability to sleep, attend school, and other areas of her life, seek an evaluation from a licensed mental health practitioner.

Talk Back

When children learn that they have the power to talk back to their worry brains, they feel empowered to cope with anxiety-producing stressors. Teach your child that anxious thoughts make us feel powerless, but talking back to anxious thoughts gives us control over the situation.

- Boss back:** Have your child practice saying, “You’re not in charge of me, worry brain! I know I can handle this!” Help your child create specific scripts to target certain triggers.
- Thought stopping:** When intrusive thoughts overwhelm children, they go into fight-or-flight mode. Teach your child to stop anxious thoughts before they snowball by saying, “No! That’s not true!” This technique interrupts the anxious thought cycle.
- Create a character:** One thing that helps young children is creating a character to represent the anxiety. It’s easier to talk back to a character they can visualize in the moment.

Childhood anxiety can feel overwhelming for both the child and the parent, but it is treatable. If your child’s anxiety is pervasive and negatively affecting her ability to sleep, attend school, and other areas of her life, seek an evaluation from a licensed mental health practitioner.

Accommodations to help the anxious student

- Extra time and warnings before transitions
- Preferential seating (near the door, near the front of the room, near the teacher's desk)
- Clearly stated and written expectations (behavioral and academic)
- Frequent check-ins for understanding
- Not requiring to read aloud or work at the board in front of the class
- Video-taped presentations or presenting in front of the teacher (instead of the whole class)
- Extended time for tests
- Tests taken in a separate, quiet environment (to reduce performance pressure and distraction)
- Word banks and equation sheets: These are useful for children with test anxiety, who tend to "go blank" when taking a test. Using one notecard for important facts, dates, etc. can also be helpful.
- "Cool down passes" to take a break from the classroom. This should be clearly explained to the student. Examples might include a walk down the hallway, getting water, standing outside the classroom door for a few minutes, completing colouring pages in the back of the room, or using a mindfulness app with headphones.
- Breaking down assignments into smaller pieces
- Modified tests and homework
- Set reasonable time limits for homework
- Record class lectures or use a scribe for notes
- Preferential group (teacher or adult child knows well) for field trips
- Preferential seating in large assemblies (near the back of the room)
- Identify one adult at school to seek help from when feeling anxious (school counsellor, if available)
- Buddy system: Pair student with a peer to assist with transitions to lunch and recess (these less structured situations can trigger anxious feelings)

- Help after illness: Missed work can spike anxious feelings. Providing class notes and exempting students from missed homework can help.

- Substitute teachers: Letting the child or family know when a substitute will be in the classroom can help the child prepare.

Children and adolescents with anxiety disorders don't always ask for help. Many struggle through the day, only to experience tantrums and meltdowns at home. It's essential to establish a positive relationship with the classroom teacher and have regular check-ins with the treatment team to evaluate what helps and what doesn't. It can take time to develop the strategies that best help your child, but with a solid plan in place anxious children can thrive in the classroom setting and learn to manage their symptoms throughout the day.