

SUPPORTING YOUR ANXIOUS CHILD

In conversations with schools throughout Northern Gateway Public Schools, a theme I have noticed more than ever before is significant apprehension by many students of all ages. Despite the obvious factors why this is the case, the issue of anxiousness is front and centre for many children and their families.

This article is not meant to initiate more controversy, it is simply to give strategies for parents on how to help their children overcome fears. We all know that when fear takes root, it can evolve into anxiety and depression.

If you are feeling lost in how to support your child, here are some guidelines on what to say and do and when to reach out for help.

1. Ask Open-Ended, Non Threatening Questions

Let your child tell you the problem when they are ready, not when they are hungry, tired or frustrated. Questions about positive parts of their day will encourage them to look for the good.

- Is there anything you wished were different today?
- Tell me about the hardest part of your day
- What made you laugh?
- What are you thankful for?
- What are you looking forward to tomorrow?

2. Listen Attentively

Let your child know you understand, love and accept them no matter what. Knowing they are loved by you helps build inner strength.

- Give eye contact
- Be genuine in your responses
- Normalize their feelings, don't dismiss them.
- Do not be too hasty with advice

3. Resist the Urge to Rescue Your Child

No parent wants to see their child struggle or be uncomfortable. It is a natural instinct to jump in to make their life easier. The best way to help your child overcome anxiety is to teach them to deal with it as it comes up.

- Being exposed to new things helps children learn, gain skills and confidence
- Invite them to brainstorm their own solutions
- Encouraging your child to face their fears will build confidence

4. Model Healthy Ways to Handle Anxiety

All parents get anxious from time to time. Some may even have a diagnosed Anxiety Disorder. This is okay! Managing your own stress is the best way to keep your child from picking up on your anxiety. You have likely identified what makes you anxious, how to set up boundaries and when you need professional help. These are all invaluable tools that you can teach your child.

- Do not focus on your specific fears or worries, rather share what you do that helps
- Be aware of your facial expressions, your tone or the words you choose to ensure you convey a neutral demeanor
- Avoid exposure to alarming media and news stories for yourself and your child

5. Practice Mindfulness For Yourself and With Your Child - Dr. Jamie Howard, Director of the Stress and Resilience Program of the [Child Mind Institute](#) shares two common techniques to try:

- **Squeezing Muscles:** starting with your toes, pick one muscle and squeeze it tight. Count to five. Release and notice how your body changes. Repeat exercise moving up your body.
- **Belly Breathing:** Put one hand on your stomach and one on your chest. Slowly breathe in from your stomach (expand like a balloon) and slowly breathe out (deflate). Repeat until you feel your heart rate return to normal.

6. Stick To a Consistent Routine - Children thrive on structure and consistency. They feel safe when they know what to expect and have a schedule for meals, screen time and bedtime.

7. Know When to Seek Professional Help - Be cautious to not self-diagnose your child. An Anxiety Disorder can only be diagnosed by a trained professional such as a psychologist, pediatrician, or psychiatrist. Begin with an appointment to your family doctor.

Parenting is not always a walk in the park. As a mother of 4 children, I am all too familiar with the burden of supporting a child who is feeling anxious. I wish I could tell you that there is a quick fix, a magic pill, or an easy answer, but I can't. What I know is this: no one loves your child more than you, you are your child's most important teacher and role model, it is a sign of strength to seek help.

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