

## Helping your Child Cope with Anxiety

**Anxiety is Normal and Common:** Anxiety and fears are a normal part of childhood. Fear involves emotional and body reactions to a threat, and anxiety is the reaction to a possible future threat. In general, anxiety is considered healthy and promotes motivation, achievement and careful behavior. New fears and anxiety are also a positive sign that kids are able to think about solving problems on their own. Parents can help kids learn to understand their fears and anxieties and move through the experiences with positive feelings.

**Anxiety Disorders are Common too:** About 10% of kids will develop what are considered Anxiety Disorders. Some of the problems that can develop from anxiety are: missing school, and avoiding play, exercise and social activities. This can create a cycle of avoidance, which can lead to more anxiety and poorer health overall.

**What are Childhood Anxiety Disorders?** Childhood anxiety disorders differ from normal fear or anxiety by being excessive or continuing beyond age-appropriate periods. Children with anxiety disorders often display emotional distress including crying, tantrums or emotional outbursts. They may also engage in widespread avoidance such as trying to escape, hiding, and being "on the lookout for danger" much of the time. In addition, kids often have body symptoms like muscle tension, stomachaches, headaches, nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath or sleep problems.

**Coping Tools:** Using a few simple strategies, kids can learn to shrink their fears and anxieties. Parents can help too by practicing skills together with kids.

- **Body relaxation-** Try to stay calm, use belly breathing and talk more slowly, or not at all, to help kids relax. Try lying down or sitting and closing eyes to help with relaxation. Movement followed by stillness can also help, like doing jumping jacks and then lying on the floor to notice the body slowly calming down. Offer to join your child in some form of body calming, like "let's take deep breaths", or "do you want to move to get the feelings out?"
- **Calm mind-** We think differently when we are anxious or upset, tending to focus on the "what ifs" and bad things that could happen. We can choose to

think a different way or distract ourselves from worry. Teach opposite or "also true" ideas like "things usually work out okay" or "I don't like this feeling, but I can handle it" or "It will be okay".

Mindfulness is the practice of being in the present moment. Practice mindfulness together by taking walks outside, observing things in nature or noticing sights and sounds while driving in the car.

- **Face fears and challenges in small steps-** Because fighting, fleeing (avoiding) or freezing are the common reactions to anxiety and fears, it is important to reverse reactions to fear and anxiety by facing fears and challenges. If we continue to avoid or allow anxiety/fears to determine what we do, anxiety becomes stronger and a bigger problem. So, choose smaller challenges to help your child face fears in small ways until they are able to handle bigger challenges.

Praise your child's **effort** to face challenges: Any way that a child **tries** to face a fear is a **success!** Knowing that they tried despite difficulty builds self-esteem.

If you are concerned that your child's anxiety is disrupting their ability to be a kid or is disrupting your family life, please seek guidance from your child's pediatrician.

Additional Resources:

*Anxiety Free Kids*, by Bonnie Zucker

*My Anxious Mind: A Teens Guide to Managing Anxiety and Panic*, by Tompkins and Martinez

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org) site includes PDF Facts for Families entitled The Anxious Child

American Psychological Association [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org) Psychology Help Center, topic; Anxiety provides PDF entitled FYI Understanding Anxiety Disorders and Effective Treatment