

Parental Accommodation in Anxiety: Understanding How to Help Kids in a Helpful Way

Anxiety, Worries and Fears: 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 or imagined 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.

Parental Accommodation: It can be hard to see your child feeling anxious or scared, and many parents naturally try to help their kids feel better when this happens. Sometimes the help parents offer can take away a child's anxiety in the short term, but can end up "helping" or "feeding" anxiety in the long term.

Don't: Things that feed anxiety and make it harder for kids to learn to cope:

- **Protecting from worries-** Shielding kids from things that might make them feel anxious ends up strengthening that worry and teaches them they should be scared (if it wasn't bad, why would we be protecting them?!).
- **Becoming part of the habit-** When feeling anxious, many kids engage in habits or routines that help them feel better at the moment. It's common for parents to become part of habits by helping kids avoid stress or aiding in the habit; this can help grow the habit like a snowball!
- **Reassuring-** We want to tell kids it will be okay if they're feeling scared, but if they're constantly needing our reassurance to calm down, they're learning that they need YOU in order to feel better.
- **Telling kids to feel less scared-** Sometimes we might tell kids to stop being upset or there is nothing to worry about. This happens because adults are trying tell kids they are okay. This can "feed" the anxiety too by encouraging anxiety to get bigger in order to be noticed. Kids can end up feeling more scared and alone as a result.

Do: Using a few simple strategies, parents can help their children in a helpful way:

- **Boss Back anxiety and face our fears-** To boss back anxiety, we try mini challenges to show anxiety that nothing bad will happen when we face our fears or do the opposite of what anxiety says we should do. Every time we face our fears instead of avoiding them, they get smaller!
- **Praise effort-** Parents can praise a 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 and takes back control over worry.
- **Body relaxation-** A great way to help your child calm their body down on their own is to practice body relaxation skills with them. 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-** Instead of needing kids to rely on parents to tell them it's okay, we can help them to choose to think a different way or distract themselves 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".

If you are concerned about your child's anxiety and are seeking support in how to best support your child, please seek guidance from your child's pediatrician. We also offer an anxiety coping skills group at Avon Pointe (440) 930-6250 opt. 2.

Additional Resources:

Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents

By Ronald M. Rapee

Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD: A Scientifically Proven Program for Parents

By Eli R. Lebowitz