

What to Say to Calm an Anxious Child

"I am here; you are safe." Anxiety has a way of making things look worse and feel scarier than when we are not feeling worried. These words can offer comfort and safety when your child is feeling out of control, especially if they are at the height of their worry. If you're not sure what to say, this is an excellent go-to phrase!

"I want you to tell me about it." Give your child room to talk about their fears without interrupting. Some children need to have time to process through their thoughts. *Do not offer solutions or try to fix it.* Children sometimes do better with a set amount of time: "Let's talk about your worries for 10 minutes so I want you to stop and Calm down then when I have seen you have calmed down let's talk."

"How big is your worry?" Help your child verbalise the size of their worry and give you an accurate picture of how it feels to them. They can represent their worry by using arm length (hands close together or arms stretched wide apart) or by drawing three circles on a paper (small, medium and large) and choosing the one that applies. Or scaling 1-10

"What do you want to tell your worry?" Explain to your child that worry is like an annoying "worry bug" that hangs around telling them to be worried. Create a few phrases, and then give them permission to talk back to this "worry bug." They can even be bossy: "Go away!" or "I don't have to listen to you!" Use silly voices, and try it loud and quiet.

"Can you draw or write it done like a letter?" Many children cannot express their emotions with words. Encourage them to draw, paint or create their worries on paper. When they are finished, make observations, and give them a chance to explain the significance: "That's a lot of blue!"

"Let's change the ending." Anxious children often feel stuck in the same pattern without a way out. Help them see different options by telling their story, but leaving off the ending. Then, create a few new endings. Some can be silly, but at least one should be realistic for your child. Focus on your child conquering their fears with confidence!

"What other things do you know about (fill in the blank)?" Some children feel empowered when they have more information about their fear (especially things like dying, bees, elevators, etc.). Grab a book from the library, research things together rather than them do it on their own, research together online together as there is a lot of rubbish on the internet and you are guiding them as their parent on what is right advice and support: How often does your fear happen? How do people stay safe?

Which calming strategy do you want to use?" Work proactively to create a long list of calming strategies your child enjoys. *Practice them during the day, at random times when your child feels calm.* When your child feels a worry sneaking into their thoughts, encourage them to pick something from the list so this then becomes automatic. *"Practice makes near perfect"*

"I'm going to take a deep breath." Sometimes our children are so worried that they resist our encouragement to pick a calming strategy. In this case, use yourself as the calming skill! *"Role model"*

Verbalise what you are doing and how it makes you feel. Some people hold their children close so they can feel the rise and fall of their chest as they breathe.

"It's scary AND..." Acknowledge your child's fear without making it even more frightening by using the word "AND." After the word "and" you can add phrases like, "You are safe." or "You've conquered this fear before." or "You have a plan." *This model an internal dialogue your child can use next time they are feeling worried.*

"I can't wait to hear about..." It's hard to see our children suffer with worry. Many parents rush in to rescue their child from an anxiety-producing situation. Encourage your child that they will survive this difficult feeling by bringing up a topic to talk about when you're together later — what they did at breaks, who they sat by at lunch, how did they feel in school, what made it worrying?? etc.

"What do you need from me?" Instead of assuming that you know what your child needs, give them an opportunity to tell you what would help. Older children may be able to verbalise if they need you to listen, give a hug, or help them find a solution.

"This feeling will pass." This may be a phrase you can both use when your child is at the height of panic. All feelings pass eventually. It often feels like they will never end, you won't make it through, or it's too hard. And that's OK. Don't let your brain get stuck in that moment; focus on the relief that is on the horizon.

Anxiety and worry look different for every child. Not every one of these strategies will work for your child. *You are the expert on your child. If you try something and it makes their worries worse, don't panic. Just pick something else from the list to try next time. Eventually, you will find a few phrases that are effective for sending a calm, encouraging and empowering message to your child.*

How You Can Help Your Anxious Child

Anxious children can benefit a great deal by support from their parents. The following tips will provide you with some ideas for helping your anxious child.

- **Routines and Structure**

Establish consistent daily routines and structure. Routines reduce anxiety and regular daily patterns emphasize predictability. A regular routine will give a sense of control to both parent and child. Anxious children do not cope well with a disorganized, spontaneous family life style.

Take care of the basic needs of your child, especially to prevent fatigue and hunger. Establish a regular bedtime routine consisting of quieter activities (e.g. bath, reading with parent, talking with parent), which helps your child to gradually relax.

Provide opportunities for exercise. Exercise is helpful in relieving stress and helping your child's body to relax.

It is important for children to have limits set and consequences for breaking the limits. Children feel secure when there are limits setting restrictions on inappropriate behaviours.

- **Help Children Identify Feelings**

Help your child notice different feelings by naming various feelings she or others may experience. Explain how people show their feelings (through faces, bodies, words) and that showing your feelings is an important way for others to understand how you are feeling. Help your child notice how different feelings "feel" in his own body, for example tight hands, butterflies in stomach, etc.

- **Provide Opportunities for Communicating About and Feelings**

It is helpful for children to talk about their feelings, however talking about feelings is not easy for children, especially when they are asked directly. It is important for parents to watch and listen carefully for the times when a child does express feelings, either directly through words or indirectly through behaviours. At these times, you can help your child by acknowledging and accepting her feelings through simply reflecting them back to her and refraining from providing advice or asking questions. When a child's feelings are criticized, disapproved of, or not accepted by a parent, his internal sense of self is weakened.

- **Provide Soothing and Comforting Strategies**

Comforting and soothing a child are very helpful strategies that parents can use in relieving anxiety. These strategies communicate to the child that she is safe and cared for. Verbal reassurances of safety and love, rocking, cuddling, holding, massage, singing, and telling stories are just some of the soothing and comforting strategies that parents can use. Parents may be surprised to realize that children may sometimes need comforting and soothing that seems to the parent to be too "babyish" for the child's age. However, anxious children do need extra soothing experiences that relax and relieve the tension in their bodies.

- **Respect Your Child's Fears**

Children are generally not helped when parents tell them to stop being afraid of something. What is helpful to most children is an approach in which you acknowledge their fears and at the same time let them know that you will help them overcome these fears.

- Model Brave Behaviour

Children look to others for guidance on how to respond in unfamiliar situations. They usually watch for cues from their parents and use these cues to help determine if the situation is safe or not. If the parent's response is fearful or anxious, the child's response is also likely to be fearful or anxious.

Although it is important for parents to model appropriate cautionary and safety behaviours when appropriate, it is important for parents to act as confident and brave role models as well. If a parent is overly anxious and over-protective, this anxiety can be easily communicated to a child with the accompanying message that the world is too dangerous. As well, the child also receives the message that he is incapable.

Parents need to acknowledge and understand their own anxieties and make an effort to contain them when appropriate in the presence of their children. Sometimes, parents need to act brave even if they don't feel brave. An important and helpful message for an anxious child to receive from a parent is that the parent has confidence both in the child and in the situation.

- Encourage Brave Behaviour

While children are generally not helped when parents demand that they face their fears all at once, they are helped when parents can gently encourage them to approach feared situations. This is because exposure to feared situations leads to desensitization and reduction of the fear and anxiety. However, approaching feared situations can be difficult for anxious children since they would rather avoid them. One way of helping a child approach a feared situation is to go about it in small steps so that each step is achievable and gradually becomes a little more difficult. Another important strategy for parents is to reward a child for trying to approach a feared situation. A child will also find it helpful to be reminded that the fear will get smaller over time. In addition, children can be reminded of fears and difficult situations that they have overcome in the past.

- Teach Relaxation Skills

Learning relaxation skills will help children feel better when they are anxious, worried or scared. It will also help them learn that they have some control over their own bodies rather than being controlled by their anxiety.

One way to help your child relax is to encourage slow, deep breathing. You can help your child practice this by getting her to imagine slowly blowing bubbles. Another way to relax is to ask her to alternately tense and relax her muscles. Additionally, some of the soothing and comforting strategies outlined above work very well to relax children.

You can also help your child use his imagination to relax. Help your child to imagine a safe and relaxing place and to notice the good relaxing feelings in his body. Or, have him imagine a container (such as a big box) to put his worries in so they are not running wild in his mind and bothering him when he needs or wants to be doing other things.

- Encourage "Feeling Good" Activities:

When children are anxious, encourage them to engage in activities they enjoy such as playing with a favourite toy, doing a fun art or craft activity, doing something active outside, playing a game, reading a book, or playing with friends. Children will often need the assistance and attention of their parents to engage in these fun activities if they are anxious.

- **Storytelling**

There are many children's books available that deal specifically with anxiety, fears and worries. These books can be very helpful for children as the stories will often model various ways of coping with fears and anxiety. When searching for books, use keywords such as anxiety, worry, fear, scary, scared, shy, etc.

- **Teach Problem-Solving Strategies**

Help your child with their worries and problems by teaching them how to problem-solve by defining the problem, brainstorming all possible solutions and their consequences, and choosing the best solution.

Be aware, however, not to jump in too early to help "fix" your child's problems. Remember to give your child lots of time to express his negative feelings around worries and problems first where you are just listening and acknowledging feelings before helping him to figure out a solution.

- **Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts**

Help your child to understand that the negative and pessimistic things she says to herself about herself are not helpful and can influence how she feels and behaves. For example, thinking (or saying), "I'm so hopeless, I'll never do it," can make her feel angry, hopeless, sad and ultimately even more anxious.

By changing the unhelpful thoughts with more helpful and positive thoughts, for example by saying or thinking, "If I keep practicing, I'll get better," or "Even if I make a mistake, I can learn and do better the next time," your child's anxiety levels will be reduced.

Again, remember to allow your child lots of time to express her negative thoughts around worries and fears first before helping her to figure out more helpful ways of thinking about the situation.

