



ANXIETY



Parent's guide to supporting at home

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Everyone experiences worry and fear and this is normal. In fact some worry/fear is good for us as it's a way of keeping ourselves safe. Worries and fears come and go in different situations and are a natural response to new situations.

Anxiety is when the worry becomes out of control, stays for a long period of time and begins to limit our experiences by preventing us from doing certain things including things we have previously enjoyed. When in a state of anxiety we overestimate how likely something bad will happen, underestimate our ability to cope with the situation and overestimate the consequences of an event. We amplify the fear and bring the fear of something happening into the present, which impacts our ability to deal with the world around us.

What should we avoid doing when supporting an anxious child?

Avoid excessive reassurance

When we go over the top with reassurance it sends a message to the child that it must be something to worry about. The more we talk about the anxiety, the more it confirms that the situation is worth worrying about to the child.

Avoid taking over the problem/saving the child from the anxiety

If we take away the problem for the child or "save" them from experiencing the thing causing anxiety we are preventing them from building confidence when they manage to cope with it. Children need to experience the problem and live through it so they can begin to recognise they can cope and deal with the situation when it arises again.

Avoid avoiding the problem

We should try to avoid stopping the situation that causes distress. As a parent it's natural to want to protect your child from being upset but by avoiding the situations that cause anxiety we are preventing them from finding ways to deal with a situation. The more we avoid a situation, the more it reinforces that it's a scary situation and should be avoided. Instead we need to support children when they experience the thing causing the anxiety and help them to reflect on how well they did coping with the situation and what they can do to make it even better when they experience it again.

Avoid threatening consequences

If we tell a child that they will "go to bed early/miss out on a treat" etc if they don't do the thing that is making them anxious we are actually giving them a way out. Many children will prefer to do the consequence than face the thing making them anxious as this is often less anxiety-inducing than the thing itself. In these situations, children will opt for the consequence meaning they avoid the situation causing anxiety and never learn to deal with the situation itself.

Avoid giving too much time to the negatives

Try not to talk about the situation with others and discussing the negatives of a certain situation. That's not to say we don't talk about the negatives and gloss over them but rather do this and then move on to look at the positives of how they will feel when they have got the anxiety under control and can cope with the situations. As adults where we shine the spotlight and what we emphasise becomes the area that will develop and grow in the child's mind.

Avoid a mismatch between words and body language

Try to make sure that your body language reflects the words you are saying. If you are being calm and reassuring, make sure that your body language and facial expression also reflect this – children pick up on your body language and need to feel reassured by all our actions as well as words –if you look tense when talking about a situation, it will reinforce that it is something to feel anxious about.

Avoid praising being brave

If we talk too much about being brave it sends a reinforcement to the child that the situation must be scary as they need to be brave to overcome it!

Avoid using a lucky charm/toy or a comforter

If we give the child a lucky charm/toy or a comforter they begin to associate only being able to do the skill (go to sleep in their own bed, come into school) if the comforter is there. The child grows to believe that they cannot do the task without it and any success they do have with the situation will be attributed to the comforter/toy rather than them recognising that they have the skills to overcome the fear.

HOW CAN WE HELP AND SUPPORT CHILDREN WITH ANXIETY?

When supporting an anxious child it is important to acknowledge the fear but also to support them in questioning why they hold this belief. We should encourage them to take small risks that help them to change their thinking about a situation. We need to develop a realistic thinking approach and support children in looking for clues and evidence that support a belief and if there isn't any help them to readjust their thinking and belief using the evidence. We should only support children in readjusting their thinking if they feel able to and want to overcome their anxiety. We should never force a child to face their anxiety unless they feel able to as this can make the situation worse or the support/intervention will fail as the child is not committed to wanting to change the situation.

OTHER RESOURCES

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/anxiety/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/anxiety-in-children/>