



LEGACY

PARENTING WITH ETERNITY IN MIND

————— BREAKOUT SESSION —————

FROM WORRIER TO WARRIOR: PARENTING A CHILD WITH ANXIETY

LED BY SONYA FOSTER

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Parenting a Child with Anxiety

Led by Sonya Foster

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What is Anxiety?

Everybody experiences anxiety sometimes, especially when faced with unfamiliar, dangerous or stressful situations. Anxiety is a normal response to a perceived threat, and includes physical, emotional and mental responses such as an increase in adrenalin, feelings of worry and confusion, and thoughts about danger and catastrophic outcomes. Normal levels of anxiety can assist people to be more focused and motivated, and to solve problems more efficiently. However, chronic or high levels of anxiety can reduce a person's capacity to respond appropriately or effectively to stressful situations or even normal routine activities. For example a highly anxious person may experience constant physical feelings of panic and may seek to avoid anything that might trigger their anxiety (such as being alone, going to school, talking in front of a group).

This hot topic aims to help parents and caregivers understand anxiety problems and provide some ideas for parents to support a child experiencing high levels of anxiety.

Anxiety triggers

Anxiety may be triggered in many different ways.

Sources of anxiety may include (but are not be limited to):

- fear of social situations
- fear negative evaluation and rejection
- fear of performing in public
- fear of a specific object or situation (e.g. storms or lightning/thunder, insects, blood)
- fear of being separated from a parent/caregivers
- fear about a parent/caregivers being harmed
- fears of harm to self
- fears about academic performance and exams
- fears about starting school or work
- generalized fears about the future (what will happen, how it might turn out)

How to tell if a young person is anxious

Anxiety may manifest as a number of physical symptoms including:

- muscle tension
- shaking/ trembling and heart palpitations
- sweating/ flushing or feeling very hot or cold
- feelings of choking
- feeling faint or dizzy
- rapid breathing, feelings of shortness of breath, or breath holding
- difficulty concentrating
- restlessness
- being easily startled
- severe blushing
- numbness or 'pins and needles' in arms and legs
- recurring headaches, stomach aches, backaches
- fatigue
- sleeping difficulties
- going to the toilet more frequently

In addition, children and young people experiencing anxiety may display a number of behavioral symptoms including:

- clinging to parents (young children)
- tantrums (young children)
- refusing to go to school
- withdrawing from friends and family
- avoidance of particular object/situation [Parentline.com](https://www.parentline.com)
- being a perfectionist
- being excessively slow
- shyness
- substance misuse
- seeking reassurance
- negative thoughts or pessimism

Impacts of Anxiety

When a young person is quiet and compliant, anxiety symptoms may be overlooked. As a result, they may not receive the help and support they need, which may lead to increasing problems with anxiety in adolescence and adulthood. As symptoms of anxiety become more entrenched and chronic, an anxiety disorder may develop. Research shows young people with untreated anxiety problems may:

- perform poorly in school
- miss out on important social experiences
- experience depression and relationship problems
- engage in substance abuse Anxiety also often co-occurs with other disorders such as depression, eating disorders, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Teach your child the skills they need to manage their anxiety

It's normal for children to feel afraid sometimes. It can even be a good thing. After all, your child wouldn't think twice about running into oncoming traffic or jumping off a cliff if they didn't have a little fear. Fear is meant to keep them safe.

But sometimes, children can be scared of objects or situations that don't actually pose a threat—for example, a fear of public speaking or monsters lurking under their bed. This anxiety can prevent them from doing things they'd like to do (like trying out for the soccer team).

The way you respond to your child's anxiety will make a big difference in how they learn to cope with anxious feelings. Below are eight strategies that can help an anxious child learn to deal with their uncomfortable feelings.

Strategies to Help an Anxious Child

1. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.

None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety isn't to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It's to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they're anxious. And as a byproduct of that, the anxiety will decrease or fall away over time.

2. Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious.

Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset, starts to cry—not to be manipulative, but just because that's how she feels—and her parents whisk her out of there, or remove the thing she's afraid of, she's learned that coping mechanism, and that cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

3. Express positive—but realistic—expectations.

You can't promise a child that his fears are unrealistic—that he won't fail a test, that he'll have fun ice skating, or that another child won't laugh at him during show & tell. But you can express confidence that he's going to be okay, he will be able to manage it, and that, as he faces his fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives him confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you're not going to ask him to do something he can't handle.

4. Respect her feelings, but don't empower them.

It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. So if a child is terrified about going to the doctor because she's due for a shot, you don't want to belittle her fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic, help her understand what she's anxious about, and encourage her to feel that she can face her fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

5. Don't ask leading questions.

Encourage your child to talk about his feelings, but try not to ask leading questions—“Are you anxious about the big test? Are you worried about the science fair?” To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: “How are you feeling about the science fair?”

6. Don't reinforce the child's fears.

What you don't want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: “Maybe this *is* something that you should be afraid of.” Let's say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time she's around a dog, you might be anxious about how she will respond, and you might unintentionally send a message that she *should*, indeed, be worried.

7. Encourage the child to tolerate her anxiety.

Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what he wants or needs to do. It's really encouraging him to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the “habituation curve”—it will drop over time as he continues to have contact with the stressor. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that's how we get over our fears.

8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.

When we're afraid of something, the hardest time is really *before* we do it. So another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory period. If a child is nervous about going to a doctor's appointment, you don't want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go; that's likely to get your child more keyed up. So just try to shorten that period to a minimum.

9. Think things through with the child.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true—how would she handle it? A child who's anxious about separating from her parents might worry about what would happen if they didn't come to pick her up. So we talk about that. If your mom doesn't come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? “Well I would

tell the coach my mom's not here." And what do you think the coach would do? "Well he would call my mom. Or he would wait with me." A child who's afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick her up can have a code word from her parents that anyone they sent would know. For some kids, having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

There are multiple ways you can help kids handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Kids are perceptive, and they're going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you can't handle the stress or the anxiety. I'm not saying to pretend that you don't have stress and anxiety, but let kids hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.

11. Distinguish Between Real Threats and False Alarms

Talk to your child about how anxiety is meant to keep them safe. For instance, if they were being chased by a lion, their brain would signal to their body that they're in danger. They would notice changes in their body like sweaty palms and an increased heart rate. They would get an immediate rush of energy as they prepare to bolt from the lion (a real threat).

Then tell them there are also times when their brain triggers a false alarm. These false alarms can cause them to feel intense fear over situations that are far from life-or-death. False alarms can include situations like trying out for the basketball team, speaking in front of a lot of people, or preparing for a big test.

When they're anxious, ask, "Is your brain giving you a real alarm right now or a false alarm?" Then, help them decide what action to take.

12. Tackle Negative Thoughts

Like adults, your child is prone to negative thinking. This negative thinking can cause anxiety and erode their self-esteem.

Below are some skills you can teach them to identify their negative thoughts, question them, and change them into positive, realistic ones using positive self-talk.

- **Catch it.** In order to tackle a negative thought, they first have to be able to spot it. Help them create a short list of negative thoughts they have often.
- **Challenge it.** Encourage your child to become like a detective who gathers clues to assess the evidence behind their anxious thoughts. For example, if they frequently tell themselves, "I'm stupid," have them ask themselves, "Is it true? Am I stupid? Have there been times when I've shown that I'm smart?" This will teach them to not just accept every negative thought that comes into their head.
- **Change it.** Once they're able to recognize and challenge their negative self-talk, the final step is to replace it with a positive one. Don't rush to say, "Oh honey, you're not stupid." Not only will they not believe you, but they won't learn how to change their negative thinking. Instead, ask, "What would you say to a friend who thought they were stupid?" When they offer a kind response, encourage them to tell themselves the same thing.

While it's important to reassure an anxious child, it's even more important to teach them how to treat themselves with kindness and compassion using healthier self-talk. Then, when you're not there right by their side to offer reassuring words, they can reassure themselves.

13. Teach Deep Breathing

Studies show that slow, deep breathing can help curb symptoms of both depression and anxiety. If your child experiences a lot of physical symptoms of anxiety, like a racing heartbeat or tight muscles, teach them how to calm their body with some simple breathing exercises.

One quick and easy way to help them get their breathing under control is to "smell the pizza." Here's how to do it:

- **Imagine a slice of pizza.** You can also replace "pizza" with any other hot food, such as a cookie or soup.
- **Smell the pizza.** Take a deep breath through your nose to inhale the delicious scent.
- **Cool the pizza.** Pretend you're cooling the pizza by blowing out of your mouth slowly.

An alternative exercise is to teach them the "bubble blowing" technique. Tell them to pretend like they're blowing bubbles with a wand. Remind them of how softly they need to blow to get a nice big bubble. This will help them remember to slowly exhale.

Do these exercises together a few times to help them calm their body. Talk about how they can remind themselves to do it on their own when they're feeling anxious.

14. Try The Stepladder Approach

Anxious children will often go to extreme lengths to avoid their fears. Unfortunately, avoidance only increases their anxiety. Although it may feel scary, facing fears will help resolve anxiety in the long run.

If your child is afraid of something specific, like sleeping alone in the dark or meeting new people, help them face their fears one small step at a time using the stepladder approach. The goal of this approach is for them to do something that is moderately scary—and to keep practicing it until it isn't so scary anymore. Then, they can take the next step.

It's important, however, to move slowly. If you try to force your child to do something that is too scary, they may grow more fearful and your efforts will backfire.

Depending on what your child's fear is, you may have a few steps or you may have a lot. But it's important to get your child on board during this stage to ensure she's invested in trying to create a change.

15. Help Them Change the Channel

If your child is anxious about things they can't control, such as being worried that it might rain tomorrow and cause a baseball game to be canceled, help them get their mind off the anxiety.

When your child is preoccupied with a specific worry, ask, "Is there anything you can do about that?" If the answer is yes, help them solve the problem.

For example, if they're worried about a science test, studying would be a good idea. Or, if they're worried about not making the basketball team, they could practice their skills.

But, if they're worried about things they can't control, like the weather or someone else's behavior, discuss the fact that the only thing they can control is how they respond. Talk about how they might make the best of bad weather or how they might respond if someone is mean to them.

Then, help them get their mind off the subject. Incessant worrying will keep them stuck in a state of anxiety, so help them change the channel to shift the mood.

One effective way to change the channel is to encourage them to move their body and get involved in an activity. Working on a chore, running around outside, or playing a game are some simple ways to get their mind off any worries.

16. 5-4-3-2-1 Coping Technique for Anxiety

Anxiety is something most of us have experienced at least once in our life. Public speaking, performance reviews, and new job responsibilities are just some of the work-related situations that can cause even the calmest person to feel a little stressed. This five-step exercise can be very helpful during periods of anxiety or panic by helping to ground you in the present when your mind is bouncing around between various anxious thoughts.

Before starting this exercise, pay attention to your breathing. Slow, deep, long breaths can help you maintain a sense of calm or help you return to a calmer state. Once you find your breath, go through the following steps to help ground yourself:

5: Acknowledge **FIVE** things you see around you. It could be a pen, a spot on the ceiling, anything in your surroundings.

4: Acknowledge **FOUR** things you can touch around you. It could be your hair, a pillow, or the ground under your feet.

3: Acknowledge **THREE** things you hear. This could be any external sound. If you can hear your belly rumbling that counts! Focus on things you can hear outside of your body.

2: Acknowledge **TWO** things you can smell. Maybe you are in your office and smell pencil, or maybe you are in your bedroom and smell a pillow. If you need to take a brief walk to find a scent you could smell soap in your bathroom, or nature outside.

1: Acknowledge **ONE** thing you can taste. What does the inside of your mouth taste like—gum, coffee, or the sandwich from lunch?

This technique is one of many options you could use if you are feeling anxious or overwhelmed. If anxiety is something that your child struggles with regularly, and has refocusing or coping with these feelings, please talk to your doctor or contact Behavioral Health Partners at (585) 276-6900. Behavioral Health Partners is brought to you by Well-U, offering eligible individuals mental health services for stress, anxiety, and depression.

Be Aware of Your Parenting Style

Your parenting style can affect everything from how much your child weighs to how she feels about herself. It's important to ensure your parenting style is supporting healthy growth and development because the way you interact with your child and how you discipline her will influence her for the rest of her life. Researchers have identified four types of parenting styles:

- Authoritarian Parenting
- Authoritative Parenting
- Permissive Parenting
- Uninvolved Parenting

Each style takes a different approach to raising children and can be identified by a number of different characteristics.

Authoritarian Parenting

- You believe kids should be seen and not heard.
- When it comes to rules, it's "my way or the highway."
- You don't take your child's feelings into consideration.

If any of those ring true, you might be an authoritarian parent. Authoritarian parents believe kids should follow the rules without exception. Authoritarian parents are famous for saying, "Because I said so," when a child questions the reasons behind a rule. They are not interested in negotiating and their focus is on obedience.

They also don't allow kids to get involved in problem-solving challenges or obstacles. Instead, they make the rules and enforce the consequences with little regard for a child's opinion.

Authoritarian parents may use punishments instead of discipline. So rather than teach a child how to make better choices, they're invested in making kids feel sorry for their mistakes.

Children who grow up with strict authoritarian parents tend to follow rules much of the time. But, their obedience comes at a price.

Children of authoritarian parents are at a higher risk of developing self-esteem problems because their opinions aren't valued.

They may also become hostile or aggressive. Rather than think about how to do things better in the future, they often focus on the anger they feel toward their parents. Since authoritarian parents are often strict, their children may grow to become good liars in an effort to avoid punishment.

Authoritative Parenting

- You put a lot of effort into creating and maintaining a positive relationship with your child.
- You explain the reasons behind your rules.
- You enforce rules and give consequences, but take your child's feelings into consideration.

If those statements sound familiar, you may be an authoritative parent. Authoritative parents have rules and they use consequences, but they also take their children's opinions into account. They validate their children's feelings, while also making it clear that the adults are ultimately in charge.

Authoritative parents invest time and energy into preventing behavior problems before they start. They also use positive discipline strategies to reinforce good behavior, like praise and reward systems.

Researchers have found kids who have authoritative parents are most likely to become responsible adults who feel comfortable expressing their opinions.

Children raised with authoritative discipline tend to be happy and successful. They're also more likely to be good at making decisions and evaluating safety risks on their own.

Permissive Parenting

- You set rules but rarely enforce them.
- You don't give out consequences very often.
- You think your child will learn best with little interference from you.

If those statements sound familiar, you might be a permissive parent. Permissive parents are lenient. They often only step in when there's a serious problem.

They're quite forgiving and they adopt an attitude of "kids will be kids." When they do use consequences, they may not make those consequences stick. They might give privileges back if a child begs or they may allow a child to get out of time-out early if he promises to be good.

Permissive parents usually take on more of a friend role than a parent role. They often encourage their children to talk with them about their problems, but they usually don't put much effort into discouraging poor choices or bad behavior.

Kids who grow up with permissive parents are more likely to struggle academically.

They may exhibit more behavioral problems as they don't appreciate authority and rules. They often have low self-esteem and may report a lot of sadness.

They're also at a higher risk for health problems, like obesity, because permissive parents struggle to limit junk food intake. They are even more likely to have dental cavities because permissive parents often don't enforce good habits, like ensuring a child brushes his teeth.

Uninvolved Parenting

- You don't ask your child about school or homework.
- You rarely know where your child is or who she is with.
- You don't spend much time with your child.

If those statements sound familiar, you might be an uninvolved parent. Uninvolved parents tend to have little knowledge of what their children are doing. There tend to be few rules. Children may not receive much guidance, nurturing, and parental attention.

Uninvolved parents expect children to raise themselves. They don't devote much time or energy into meeting children's basic needs. Uninvolved parents may be neglectful but it's not always intentional. A parent with mental health issues or substance abuse problems, for example, may not be able to care for a child's physical or emotional needs on a consistent basis.

At other times, uninvolved parents lack knowledge about child development. And sometimes, they're simply overwhelmed with other problems, like work, paying bills, and managing a household.

Children with uninvolved parents are likely to struggle with self-esteem issues. They tend to perform poorly in school. They also exhibit frequent behavior problems and rank low in happiness.

Some parenting styles can actually make your child's anxiety worse, so it's important to take a look at your parenting style and your interactions with your child. Of the four parenting styles identified by psychologist Diana Baumrind, both authoritarian and permissive parenting are linked with higher rates of depression and anxiety among children.

Expecting perfection and controlling your child's every move is a surefire way to trigger anxiety—in yourself and in your child. It can cause your child to feel constantly pressured to succeed, which can leave them paralyzed with fear and feelings of self-doubt.

However, the boundary-free parenting approach is hardly the answer. Permissive parenting leaves so much to the child's own choice that it can produce anxiety, as well.

Parents who allow their child to deal with life's day-to-day troubles themselves help them develop more resiliency and healthy coping strategies.

Seek Professional Help

If your child's anxiety lasts more than two weeks, talk to a pediatrician. You should also talk to a pediatrician if your child's anxiety is interfering with everyday functioning.

For example, if their attendance at school or their grades are affected by their anxiety or they're struggling to get involved in social activities because of their fears, they may need some professional support.

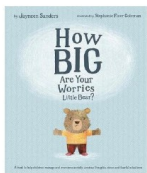
Anxiety disorders (which can include generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, social phobia, and specific phobia) in children are common. Over 4 million children in the U.S. (approximately 7%) age 3-17 years experience issues with anxiety each year.

Anxiety disorders are very treatable, but they often go unrecognized and undiagnosed. If you think your child may have an anxiety disorder, talk to the pediatrician. The pediatrician may refer your child to a mental health professional for treatment.

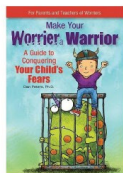
Each type of anxiety has its own set of symptoms and therefore its own treatment. Usually, treatment for anxiety involves talk therapy, but it can also include medication. A mental health professional can help your child learn skills to cope with his anxious feelings and build confidence to face some of his fears.

A therapist will likely want you involved in treatment so you can learn how to support your child at home. You may learn specific strategies to coach your child when they're feeling anxious, or you may learn how to help them face some of their fears in a healthy way.

RESOURCES



How Big Are Your Worries Little Bear?
By Jayneen Sanders



Make Your Worrier a Warrior
by Dan Peters, Ph.D. *



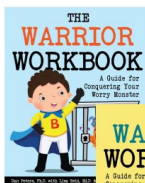
hey Warrior!
By Karen Young



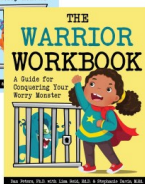
Outsmarting Worry
(An older kid's guide to managing anxiety)
by Dawn Huebner, Ph.D. *



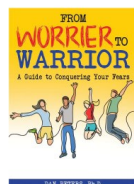
The Huge Bag of Worries
by Virginia Ironside



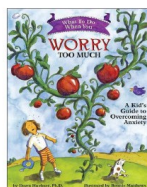
The Warrior Workbook
by Dan Peters, with Lisa Reid and Stephanie Davis *



Wilma Jean the Worry Machine
by Julia Cook



From Worrier to Warrior
by Dan Peters, Ph.D. *



What to Do When You Worry Too Much
by Dawn Huebner, Ph.D. *

*These books will be available to look at in the session.

Websites:

- WorryWiseKids.org
- Childmind.org
- Calm4kids.org

Podcasts:

- Your Anxious Child on Apple Podcast
- Theparentcue.org>episode 21 (Helping kids cope with anxiety)