

Anxiety & Fears

Anxiety is a natural part of our body's fight or flight response to protect us from danger. In some children, these feelings can become stimulated in situations that are not dangerous due to repeated negative experiences and avoidance of feared situations.

Anxiety can appear in many formats, including worry about important people, places, or events, fear that something bad or embarrassing may occur, frequent stomach or headaches, or a series of ritualized behaviors to prevent or neutralize bad thoughts or actions.

Recommendations for Parents

- Encourage your child to approach feared situations in a gradual way while slowly working up to his or her most feared situation. For example, if your child is afraid of a family pet, you would initially encourage your child to look at the animal from afar, then slowly approach the animal, then touch the animal, while making sure that the child experiences a period of less anxiety before moving to a more difficult situation.
- Do not force your child to engage in the feared situation all at once (e.g. throwing him or her into a swimming pool when afraid of water) as this will often make the fear worse instead of better.
- Encourage your child to talk to you about their worries and help your child to think about what he or she may do if the feared event occurs (e.g. call a parent if lost). If your child refuses to talk, encourage them to write or draw about their fears.
- Do not provide false reassurance for your child's realistic fears (e.g. responding "You will never throw up again" to fears of becoming sick). Instead, factually explain the event to your child and reassure your child of the measures in place to prevent the feared event (e.g. "That's why we take our vitamins to help keep our body healthy").
- Encourage your child to relax their bodies when they begin to feel anxious, such as by taking some deep breaths or by squeezing a small stress ball.
- Praise your child for engaging in tasks that you know are frightening or that the child expressed anxiety about (e.g. "Great job reading your project to the class!").



Recommendations for Children

- Use deep breathing: Teach children to take slow, deep breaths using their diaphragms (bellies). Breathe at a rate that is natural for children, but slower than usual (breathe in for 3-4 seconds, breathe out for 4-6 seconds). Have children practice with a parent or with a video/mobile app.

Bravery statements: Children at this age can use “bravery statements” to help them face the feared situation. Examples include “I can do this” and “I am strong and brave.”