

# 6 ways to help your ANXIOUS CHILD

The world can be a scary place for kids, especially right now – here, author Poppy O'Neill reveals her top tips to offer them extra support

**R**ecent studies have found that one in eight children and young people aged five to 19 have a mental health disorder, with 7.2 percent of children suffering from an anxiety disorder.\* While your child may or may not suffer with anxiety to this degree, it's important to give children the tools to regulate their emotions in order to grow into healthy, confident young people. These tips aim to help parents understand their child's anxiety and offer inspiration on how to manage and reduce it. Every child is different, so pick and choose the advice that appeals to you and work best for your child.

## HOW TO SPOT ANXIETY

We all experience anxiety – it's a normal human emotion. But often it can be irrational and when anxiety starts to become overwhelming it can impact our quality of life, physical health and relationships. The way anxiety functions and manifests is unique to everyone. However, you may recognise some of these common signs in your child:

- Reluctance to try new things
- Inability to cope with everyday challenges
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Trouble sleeping or eating properly
- Prone to angry outbursts
- Frequent irritability
- Distressing thoughts
- Excessive worry about future events
- Seeking constant reassurance
- Feeling tense most of the time

## Tip 1

### FIND THE RIGHT TIME AND PLACE TO TALK

Sitting down with your child to "have a chat" might not be the best strategy, as it could feel unnatural and intimidating to them. Try to broach the subject while you're doing a calm activity, just the two of you. Perhaps gardening, walking, cooking or colouring together. Having something else to focus on, and less eye contact, can make tricky conversations flow more easily. Take the pressure right off and don't push if they don't want to talk or can't articulate what's wrong. Have patience, trust your gut and let them take the lead.

## Tip 2

### LISTEN WELL

The right kind of listening will mean your child feels safe expressing themselves to you. Let them have their say and respond by using body language to show you are listening and understanding. When the moment's right, paraphrase what they have said, showing they have your full attention. It's important to remember that you don't need to agree with your child – a lot of worries

can be irrational – but you can still affirm and empathise with them.

Try these phrases:

- "I hear you."
- "I can see why that would make you feel sad/worried/upset."
- "That makes sense."
- "How does that feel in your body?"

This technique is called active listening and it's used by therapists to encourage the speaker to open up.

## Tip 3

You can probably list the things that trigger your child's anxiety. Times of day, situations or even a particular person might cause their stress levels to rise. Try to identify these triggers and talk to your child about them. Ask: "When this happens, how do you feel?" If there are many triggers, try to look for a unifying theme; this could be social situations, changing clothes, speaking to adults... the underlying anxiety will be particular to your child. Rather than avoiding these situations altogether, see if you can take some of the pressure off and make your child more comfortable. Ask your child for their ideas and make suggestions. Try to work together to come up with solutions, letting your child take an active role in managing their anxiety.

## Tip 4

### TRY MIND-AND-BODY CALMING ACTIVITIES

Research has found that repeated, rhythmic activities work to relax and rewire the link between a child's brain and their nervous system, making it easier for them to regulate their emotions.

Rhythmic activities include:

- Walking
- Dancing
- Running
- Bouncing on a trampoline
- Drumming
- Singing
- Yoga
- Breathing exercises

When your child is in the company of an adult they trust and feel comfortable with, a little of one or more of these activities every day can have a marked effect on their mental health, according to research carried out by American psychiatrist, Dr Bruce Perry.

## Tip 5

It's common to try to help minimise your child's difficult emotions with reassuring language. We're used to squashing down or ignoring difficult feelings in the hope that they'll go away – but this doesn't work!

Phrases to avoid:  
 "It's no big deal."  
 "Just go to sleep."  
 "I'll do it for you."

Hearing these messages, your child will believe that their feelings are not valid, making them less likely to express themselves.

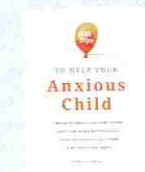
## Tip 6

### POST POSITIVE MESSAGES

Try putting positive messages around your home where your child can see them. Postcards, Post-it notes, pages from magazines or your favourite quotes – you can find positivity anywhere. Whenever you see a calming, uplifting or soothing message, write it down, cut it out or print it, stick it on your fridge, wall, or pin it to a noticeboard. Seeing short, memorable words of positivity on a regular basis as they go about their day will help give your child little boosts. **H W**

## For more, read this

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