

Assisting children with anxiety problems

Suggestions for parents and carers

Children with anxiety disorders see the world as a scary place.

They are overly sensitive to their feelings and lack confidence in their own ability. They try to avoid situations they see as difficult and as a result do not cope with challenges in their environment.

How you can help

Parents and other adults can help by supporting children to be brave. In order to be brave children need to have skills for understanding and managing their feelings. They need to learn about helpful thinking that they can use to encourage themselves to have a go, and they need to gradually build up their confidence by taking on small challenges:

- **Help to recognise and understand anxiety**

A first step in helping children gain some control over anxiety is recognising when it occurs and how it affects them.

- **Model helpful coping**

Being a good model involves showing children how to cope with emotions (not just telling them). Show children with anxiety how you use helpful self-talk in a difficult situation - e.g., "This looks a bit scary, but I'll give it a go."

- **Discourage avoidance**

Sometimes when children say they feel sick, they are describing feeling anxious. It is important that children do not avoid school attendance, homework etc. unnecessarily.

- **Praise having a go**

Encourage children with anxiety to attempt new things and praise them for trying. It is very important to emphasise trying rather than success when anxiety is a problem.

- **Introduce challenges gradually**

Children build strength and resilience by learning to face challenges. It is important to begin with small challenges that children can meet. For example, a child who is frightened of dogs might start by walking past the house when the dog is barking without having to cross the road. This improves confidence for taking on more difficult steps.

- **Start small**

Help the child to choose goals for becoming braver and to take small steps towards achieving them. Celebrate his/her success at each step. Experiencing even small successes helps to reduce anxiety.

- **Practise coping skills**

Practise using coping strategies for difficult situations. Help children talk about problems and come up with possible solutions.

- **Try not to get angry**

If a child simply refuses to do something even after you have encouraged him/her and broken the task into steps, it may simply be overwhelming at that time. Sometimes, you need to back off and praise the child for doing as much as he/she could. Then later try again with smaller steps and encourage your child to have a go, one small step at a time.

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. We welcome your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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