

Tips for Parenting the Anxious Child

Does your child:

- Worry or feel frightened excessively or without a good reason?
- Have many concerns about academic or social performance?
- Need an excessive amount of reassurance?
- Have physical complaints, such as headaches or stomach-aches, when feeling stressed?
- Become embarrassed easily?
- Have difficulty relaxing in groups?



At certain ages all children experience fears. Some children may have more difficulty with anxiety than others. The following suggestions may be useful in addressing your child's anxieties or fears:

- Encourage and reward independent activities.
 - Your child may experience physical symptoms when he is stressed; don't overreact to them.
 - To help your young child conquer her own fear, ask her to teach a doll or a stuffed animal how to be more confident.
 - Explain new situations in advance in a simple, friendly manner. Try role playing to prepare for upcoming situations.
 - Help with bedtime fears by buying your child a new and specific stuffed animal, a "special companion," which can help him feel less scared at bedtime.
- Establish clear and regular morning and bedtime routines, and stick with them. Let your child use a night light, if it helps her feel less scared. Children feel more secure with a well-structured and predictable, but not overly rigid, daily routine.
 - Assess whether television or video game violence may be contributing to your child's fears. Television and video game violence can make your child scared even if he wants to watch it and says that it does not bother him. For more information on television and video game violence and how it affects children, read Cantor J. 1998. *Mommy, I'm Scared: How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.
 - Be aware that apparent daydreaming and concentration problems at school may be caused by your child's preoccupation with fears and anxiety.
 - Ask a librarian to help you choose books to read to your child that address specific fear-some situations.
 - Don't get involved in lengthy discussions about fears. Reassure your child that you are doing all you can to keep anything bad from happening. Role play upcoming situations that are likely to cause your child anxiety.
 - Be open about and explain stresses on the family (e.g., a parent out of work, an

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Tips for Parenting the Anxious Child (continued)

impending move, a sibling experiencing serious problems) to your child in simple terms, and reassure her that the adults in the family will take care of things.

Children are sensitive to adult anxiety and may exaggerate situations that are not explained to them.

- Try to avoid extremes (e.g., being too rigid, too permissive, or overprotective).
- Be honest and objective about family problems that might make your child fearful. If the problems are too complex to address within the family (e.g., parental abuse of alcohol, abusive behavior, marital problems or parental illness [mental or physical]), seek counseling.
- Be aware that the object or situation your child identifies as the cause of her fears may be a substitute for something she is

hesitant to express (e.g., fear of “monsters” may really be fear of a person; fear of “the dark” may really be fear of the arguing she hears from another room). Consider whether there are “family secrets” your child may be afraid of or not allowed to discuss openly. Seek counseling if you find it too difficult to communicate with your child about her fears.

- Suggest that your child write a story or draw a picture of scary things, and look for clues to help you understand his fears better. An older child might write a letter or keep a journal.
- Preoccupation with death or dying or other morbid subjects may be a sign of depression. If your child is overly concerned with these things, have him evaluated by a health professional.

Source: Adapted, with permission, from Buchanan B, Yarnevich A. 1997. *When Being a Good Parent or Teacher Is Not Enough: Vol. I*. Kansas City, MO: Health Education Consultants. Web site: www.aboutkidsmentalhealth.com.

www.brightfutures.org

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