



Coach Kim: Helping an Anxious Child

We all worry about our children, but children with anxiety are a huge concern, and parents often feel helpless to help them. You should, of course, visit with your child's doctor to rule out any medical conditions, but here are a few things you can try before resorting to medication. It is always worth trying to change your child's fear-based thinking first.

1. **Don't add shame to the fear.** Let him know that it's OK and even normal to feel afraid on occasion. Almost everyone feels some fear or panic when starting something new or meeting new people. Avoid making him feel that something is wrong with him for feeling this way. Say things like "I totally understand why you would feel this way and it's perfectly normal." Anxiety gets even worse when they become anxious about being anxious. You can really help by not acting too worried.
2. **Studies have shown that when people around you believe in you, and believe you can overcome something, it's a lot easier and more likely to happen.** Tell your son often he's got this, and he's strong, capable and smart. Tell him everyone has to learn how to deal with fear. He hadn't learned how before, but now he can and you believe in him. This will help him believe in himself.
3. **Explain what anxiety and panic attacks are about.** They are the body's automatic response to fear, and they happen because your body thinks you are in danger. Everyone's body does this on occasion. Sometimes the body gets tricked though and it thinks you're in danger when you really aren't. Explain his brain is trying to protect him with these "what if" games and scary thoughts, but brains sometimes imagine things that aren't real. Help him learn to ask "*Is this scary thing real or an imagined scary thing my brain made up?*" Identifying worries as imagined will help discredit them.
4. **In a panic attack or anxiety moment, help your child come to his senses.** Have him close his eyes and tell you what he feels, what he hears right now, what he smells right now. Having him use his senses will get his brain focused on what's real — right now. Also have him pay attention to his breathing and ask if it's fast or slow, deep or shallow? Is he feeling high energy or low energy? Explain that fast shallow breathing is just the body's way to help you fight physical danger, but slow deep breaths make you feel safer.
5. **Get the pent-up, high, anxious energy out.** Hand the child a box of tissues and have him grab and throw them hard and fast across the room (or as far as they'll go) one by one. This won't break anything and it helps that pent-up energy get released.
6. **Teach kids that panic attacks and anxiety pass.** They are temporary and you can make it through them in a few minutes (usually 10-15 minutes at the most). Don't make a big deal about a panic attack. Don't talk about it too much afterwards or tell other people about it, after your child has one. This would make the attacks more significant and add shame to the mix. You want your child to see himself and his anxiety as normal and no big deal. If you see them as a small issue, he will too.

7. **If the fear is real, talk about how he could handle specific situations if they come up.** Run through some real scenarios and help him think of options in response. If "that" happens, what could he do? Preparing a response in advance will help him feel less scared.
8. **Teach kids their value can't change.** If you child fears failure and not being good enough, you can hep him change the way he sees the value of all human beings at the fundamental principle level, This will also change the way he sees his own value. Teach your child all human beings have the same exact worth and that value cannot change. Help him remember that win or lose, good grades or bad grades, he still has the same value as everyone else. Help him to stop judging others too and he will stop judging himself.
9. **Help your child recognize the difference between fears that help us and fears that hurt us.** Fears that help us are fears that motivate us to take action. Fears that hurt us paralyze us and prompt inaction. Being afraid of strangers is a helpful fear because it prompts you to be careful. Being afraid to talk to anyone or meet new people is a hurtful fear. It prompts inaction and prevents you from making friends. Teach him to ask himself, "Will worry or fear about this do anything good?" You can even role play some scary situations and help your child identify if this fear is helpful or not.
10. **Teach your child relaxation and self-calming skills.** We all need to learn how to calm our fight or flight response. If we learn how to do this as a child, it will serve us our whole life.

If your child's anxiety is still keeping him from enjoying life, I recommend you seek out some professional help. You can do this.

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