



WHAT TO DO (AND NOT DO) WHEN CHILDREN ARE ANXIOUS



THE GOAL:

BUILD COPING, NOT ELIMINATE ANXIETY

It's natural to want to protect children from distress. But avoiding every stressor often makes anxiety worse in the long run. The goal is to help children manage anxiety while still engaging in life. With practice, their confidence increases and the anxiety tends to fade over time.

RESPECT FEELINGS WITHOUT EMPOWERING FEAR

Validate, Don't Amplify

Let your child know you hear them: "That sounds really hard. I'm here with you." This shows empathy without reinforcing that the situation is dangerous.

Stay Calm and Grounded

Your presence helps regulate their nervous system. If you panic, their anxiety often escalates. Being calm is not dismissive—it's anchoring.



WHAT TO SAY (AND NOT SAY)

Use Open-Ended Questions Invite them to share:

"How are you feeling about the science fair?"

Avoid leading with:

"Are you nervous?" or "You're not scared, right?"

Express Confidence, Not Guarantees

Avoid: "Nothing bad will happen."
Try: "It might feel hard, but I know you can get through it. I'll be right here."



WHAT NOT TO DO: COMMON PITFALLS

Don't Avoid Every Stressor

Skipping every triggering activity reinforces the message that they can't handle it. Instead, offer support and build up exposure gradually.

Don't Over-Reassure

Repeating the same reassurance again and again may make anxiety worse by feeding doubt. Acknowledge the fear and redirect toward action.

Don't Let Anxiety Dictate All Decisions

It's okay to validate without giving in. Instead of changing plans, find ways to make the experience feel safer while still moving forward.



DURING PANIC OR MELTDOWNS: WHAT HELPS

When your child is already overwhelmed:

Stay Close and Say Less

Use a soft tone and few words. Try: "You're safe. I'm here."

Avoid asking questions or giving instructions in the moment.

Co-Regulate

Sit next to them. Offer your hand. Breathe together. If they have a comfort item or grounding object, bring it to them.

Support Recovery, Not Logic

Problem-solving can come later. First, help them feel calm enough to re-engage.



SUPPORT BY AGE

Young Children (ages 3–6)

- Use simple language and routines.
- Practice brave play (e.g. “Let’s be doctors together.”)
- Use visual tools (feelings charts, storybooks).

School-Age Children (ages 7–12)

- Involve them in making plans.
- Use logic games: “What’s the worst that could happen? What could we do?”
- Celebrate brave behavior, not just calm behavior.

Teens (ages 13+)

- Respect their privacy and autonomy.
- Offer choices and collaborative problem-solving.
- Acknowledge their anxiety without minimizing it.

TEACH COPING AND BUILD CONFIDENCE

Encourage Tolerance, Not Avoidance

Let them know it’s okay to feel anxious and still do things anyway. This builds resilience and trust in their own capacity.

Normalize the Habituation Curve

Anxiety usually peaks, then fades over time. Share this pattern so they learn to expect it.

“Remember how it felt scary at first, and then got easier?”

Keep Anticipation Short

If a stressful event is coming, don’t dwell on it hours in advance. Keep conversations short, reassuring, and focused on what helps.



WHEN TO GET EXTRA SUPPORT

Consider reaching out to a therapist or pediatrician if:

- Anxiety interferes with sleep, appetite, friendships, or school.
- Your child avoids entire categories of activity.
- They show signs of depression, hopelessness, or shame.
- Your strategies at home aren't making progress over time.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Books for Kids

- What to Do When You Worry Too Much by Dawn Huebner
- Brave Every Day by Trudy Ludwig

Apps & Tools

- Smiling Mind (mindfulness exercises)
- Calm Strips or fidget tools for grounding

For Parents

- Freeing Your Child from Anxiety by Tamar Chansky
- Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents by Reid Wilson and Lynn Lyons

