



## Children and Anxiety: Considerations for Mindful Parenting

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Anxiety is part of everyday life, but can get in the way of functioning if not managed effectively. Parents can help their children develop necessary life skills (i.e., coping skills) by modeling how to manage anxiety, teaching them about what anxiety is, and by helping them to face anxiety. Avoiding anxiety-provoking situations and “protecting” children from experiencing any discomfort can interfere with them learning how to tolerate even low levels of distress.

### **How to Help Your Child Manage Anxiety**

- ***Start with you; work to manage your own anxiety levels***
  - Remember that you can't be as helpful to your child if you are dysregulated
  - It's important to model healthy anxiety management, your child learns from you!
  - Calm your body-mind system using the neuroscience and mindfulness tools (slowing your breathing, present moment awareness, physical sensations, etc.)
- ***When your child is calm***
  - Provide information about anxiety (e.g., neuroscience, high levels of anxiety make it difficult to think clearly, anxiety is a part of life, etc.)
  - Validate the feelings your child has about anxiety
  - Provide information about the cognitive triangle; that thoughts, feelings behaviors are related to each other and influence each other
  - Help your child consider more helpful thought options
  - Explore the triggers your child experiences (e.g., public speaking, spelling tests, birthday parties, group projects, etc.)
  - Practice deep breathing; it's a skill that can be honed when calm
  - Discuss and develop strategies to support your child facing anxiety and engaging in life regardless of the triggers
- ***When your child is experiencing anxiety***
  - Target the brainstem to stop the release of adrenaline and cortisol (slow breathing, get a drink of water, focus on sensations, eye contact)
  - Validate your child's feelings (e.g., “it sounds like you are feeling scared,” or start with “yes,” or “you're right,” or simply reflect back what you hear)
  - Provide support for facing anxiety (e.g., rehearse, problem solve, role play, give emotional support, express your confidence in your child's ability, celebrate your child's effort)

### **Mindfulness**

*Paying attention, on purpose, to present moment experiences without judgment.*

- ***Informal Practices***
  - Slow, deep breathing
  - Box breathing or counted breathing
  - Tuning into sensations—sights, sounds, textures, etc.

## **Mindfulness (Cont'd)**

- ***Mindful Principles***—examples of how these principles help us all to face anxiety
  - **Non-judgment**—naming the situation (e.g., when you come into your science classroom you feel uncomfortable and wish you had more friends there) and noticing what happens in your cognitive triangle (e.g., you feel like leaving, you wonder if everyone thinks you're weird, you wonder if you're smart enough) without getting caught up in it
  - **Acceptance**—anxiety is part of life, we can face it
  - **Non-striving**—do your best, be proud and happy of participating regardless of the outcome
  - **Beginner's mind**—we don't know what will happen next, we don't know what other people are thinking, you might have a different experience today than you had before, things can change
  - **Curiosity**—tell me more about your fears, your thoughts...what is the worst part, where do you get stuck, what do you think would help
  - **Impermanence**—this, too, shall pass...you will have another audition/test/party...YET, you can't do it yet
  - **Trust**—you will be ok, you can do it
  - **Gratitude**—in the midst of this difficult experience, noticing who helped, noticing what felt good, noticing what was helpful
- ***Alternatives to the phrase "CALM DOWN"***
  - Take a deep breath / Let's take a deep breath
  - I notice you are having a difficult time...I wonder if you'd let me help you?
  - That can be so frustrating! Let's figure this out together.
  - I see that you are mad, how does that feel in your body?
  - Want to squeeze my hand?
  - Count to 10 / Let's count to 10
  - Smell the flowers, blow the candles
  - Would you like a drink of water?
  - Can you stand on one foot?
  - Can you feel your toes?
  - Can you squeeze this ball?
  - Just move closer to the child
  - Eye contact and gentle smile

## **Resources**

Faber & Mazlish—How to Talk so Kids will Listen and Listen so Kids will Talk  
Dan Siegel—Whole Brain Child

## **When to Reach Out for Help**

- When anxiety experiences exceed your child's coping capacity
- When you notice that anxiety is limiting life experiences and is getting in the way of experiencing joy and pleasure
- When you notice that your child's comfort zone is very small
- When you notice that anxiety interferes with reaching your child's full potential