

Coaching calmness in the anxious child

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News

A parent writes: I am increasingly concerned about my child's ability to cope with every day stress. A lot of things in his life make him tense and become preoccupied. This anxiety can happen suddenly or can build over the course of a day, and sometimes make him avoid things he enjoys. I try to talk him out of his worries but it seems to fall on deaf ears. What should I do?

Anxiety is an inherent part of all children's lives but some kids have more difficulty with it due to its frequency, intensity, and duration. It occurs more regularly and instead of acting like a fleeting wave of tension, it settles in the mind and body like a heavy weight.

Those children more prone to anxiety tend to be easily effected by the sudden twists and turns in life, as if "worry windows" have suddenly opened in their minds and they can't find a way to close them. These openings seem to widen as the child entertains more worrisome thoughts, further fueling feelings of upset, helplessness, and even victimization.

One key reason why some children are more vulnerable to anxiety is traceable to their upbringing. In some cases, the dependency formed upon parents for emotional soothing was not adequately internalized. This means that they did not learn how to self-soothe by means of relaxing their bodies and minds, and developing a track record of appropriate independent management of life stressors. Other kids are born with temperaments that make them especially sensitive and alarmed by the unexpected. Lastly, some children have experienced an acutely anxious/traumatic event in their past that continues to seek expression in their present life. Despite the underlying reason for your child's anxiety mismanagement, here are some coaching strategies:

? Start a dialogue. Begin by educating your child about the "laws of anxiety," such as everyone experiences it, it's unfair to yourself to try to prevent it by trying to live in a bubble, and the best solution is to understand and learn how to manage it. Label some of the thoughts and feelings that widen your "worry window." Explain what opens your window is different that what opens their window, but that people can learn how to better prepare when their worries get triggered.

Help them identify their triggers and early warning signs. Spontaneity and unpredictability act like fertilizer upon anxiety. Children can understand how these triggers are often present in their lives, especially during the unstructured summer. See if they can point out other triggers and the first signs that their anxiety is sprouting again. Use a imaginary rating scale of 1-10 to label their experience at various stages so that they can observe how it starts and gathers strength from the onslaught of worries and ruminations.

Teach them how to self-soothe through body relaxation, visualization, and self-talk. Alternately tensing and releasing muscle groups helps reduce bodily tension. Visually replaying relaxing scenes in one's mind helps defeat the interference of anxiety producing ones. Practicing "self-talk thinking skills" further fine-tunes anxiety self-management. Weave all three tools together by having your child take deep breaths, envisioning one of their anxiety triggers, and repeating to themselves, "I am not going to let fear and anxiety control my reactions anymore. Avoiding things that other kids enjoy because I'm afraid means less fun for me. I deserve fun and freedom, too. I am going to use all my courage and determination to beat my fear and anxiety when I feel it creeping up on me."

Use circumstances in life to predict an ensuing trigger. Each time a child successfully copes with one of their triggers they become more empowered to confront them again rather than rely upon avoidance. Point out when a worry window might open and remind them of their tools and the confidence boost that comes from beating their fears.

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