

Parenting Anxious and Fearful Babies, Toddlers and Young Children

By Alexandra Newmarch

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True fact: parenting a child with anxiety is not easy. I remember the mother of one of my little therapy clients exclaiming to me once, “It’s non-stop! I *know* she’s not doing it on purpose, but I’m so *tired* of trying to be sympathetic. I wish she’d just grow out of it.”

She was right – it *is* non-stop. It *is* tiring. And because anxiety often manifests differently in young children than it does in older children and adults, it can sometimes be hard to know if that’s even what’s going on! So how *do* you know, and if you *do* have an anxious little person, what can you do to help them?

Signs and symptoms of anxiety to watch out for

Some of the common ways that anxiety is expressed in babies, toddlers, and pre-schoolers are:

- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Nightmares and night terrors
- Crying and tantrums
- Rigid thinking (things HAVE to be done the same way every time, difficulty tolerating change or trying new things)
- Clingy, overly cautious behaviour
- Bossy and controlling behaviour
- Heightened sensitivity to sensory input (e.g. lights, sounds, fabric)
- Somatic (body-based) symptoms – tummy aches, headaches
- For verbal children, talking about the feared thing (e.g. “No balloon, no balloon, I don’t like it.”)

This isn’t an exhaustive list. Your child might tick some boxes, but not others. Some children are born “highly strung” or “little worriers”, and you might have noticed behaviours like these since Day One. Others develop fears and worries over the course of their development – for example, separation anxiety around eight months, a fear of being sucked down the plughole as a toddler, a fear of the dark as a pre-schooler. And others react to stress and anxiety in their environments (particularly in their caregivers) by becoming stressed and anxious themselves.

Ultimately, you know your child. So if **you** think they’re struggling with anxiety, it’s worth seeking out information, support and strategies for the both of you.

What do children worry about?

Worries change by age. The most common sources of anxiety for babies are separation anxiety, which is a normal part of development, and which should pass with time, unfamiliar

things/experiences, and anxiety caused by family stressors (such as bereavement or domestic violence). As children grow older, they become increasingly aware of the world around them with all its unknowns and unpredictability, and their imaginations also get bigger. This means that they can start to worry about abstract things (such as a parent dying).

What can you do to help your anxious child?

When parenting anxious kids, first start with the basics. Are they getting enough sleep, eating a relatively healthy diet, engaging in regular exercise/physical activity, and getting enough play and social connection time? As simple as they sound, these are the foundations for good mental health – not just for kids, but for teenagers and adults too. If your foundations are solid, it's so much easier to a) cope in general and b) learn (and put into practice) specific anxiety-management techniques.

For babies showing signs of anxiety, the best thing to do is provide lots of hugs and calm reassurance. If there is something specific that is upsetting them (e.g. an unfamiliar person, sound, or object), you could show them that thing in small, manageable doses, from the safety of your arms, so that they become more at ease with it, but don't push them to face it.

For babies and toddlers who display the rigid thought and behaviour patterns noted above, it's never too early to start gently encouraging an acceptance of "different" and "trying new things". Be respectful of your child's temperament and emotional capacity, and watch out for their cues for when to push them and when to let them be, but remember that the long-term benefits they'll gain from being more open to change and willing to give things a try, makes the short term discomfort (for both of you) worth it. Parenting is the day-to-day of life, but it's also the big picture. You as their parent can think ahead to one, five, ten years' time. They can't do that yet.

As your child's language skills develop, you'll increasingly be able to talk with them about their worries. Because children often find the unknown frightening, equipping them with knowledge by providing a simple explanation about how something works, or why it can't hurt them, can help to decrease their level of fear.

Take Small Steps

When tackling a specific fear, approach it as a sequence of small steps (in adult therapy, this is called "graded exposure"). Each step should be challenging, but achievable. Build upon previous successes, and only move on to the next step once your child has mastered the current one. For example, a child who is scared of dogs might start by looking at picture books and television shows featuring dogs, and learning about them. Then they might be introduced to a (carefully chosen) gentle dog from a safe distance – no expectation to pet it. Once they're comfortable having the dog nearby, they can move on to actually interacting with it. From there, they can be introduced to other dogs, with different temperaments.

Involve the whole body

Many anxiety-management techniques that you/your child would learn in therapy work by disrupting the physiological responses to anxiety (e.g. fast, shallow breathing, tense muscles, increased heart rate), to calm the body and brain. A technique that can be used from childhood to adulthood is Calm Breathing (also known as Deep Breathing). There are lots of variations on this, but

a good one for young children is to have them imagine their favourite smell and breathe in deeply, as though they were breathing in that wonderful smell and filling their lungs with it. Exhale, and repeat. This simple action slows down the breathing, and increases the flow of oxygen to the brain (so it can think more clearly) and to the muscles (so that they are able to relax), disrupting the spiral of anxiety.

Another way to relax tense muscles, encourage deeper breathing, and get endorphins flowing, is through movement. Running, dancing – anything that gets them up and fully into their bodies.

Lastly, art and craft can be a great tool to help your child process their worries in a safe, contained way, as well as opening up conversation about them.

When should you seek professional help?

If your child's anxieties are not resolving, are getting worse, and/or are causing your child ongoing distress and disrupting family life, it may be a good idea to seek professional support. Look for a therapist who specialises in working with children.

Remember – anxiety is not a life sentence. There are lots of things you can do to help your child manage their worries and thrive, and there is lots of support out there. It's just a matter of working out what's going to work best for you and your little one.

Alexandra Newmarch

Phoenix Place Play Therapy and Counselling

P.S

At Phoenix Place, we've developed some resources to help parents of anxious children, including a postcard of helpful things to say to calm an anxious child, and an eBook containing more information on the science of anxiety, and lots of practical strategies to try out. See <https://www.etsy.com/au/shop/PhoenixPlaceShop> for more detail. You can also check out our website (<http://www.phoenixplace.com.au/resources/>) for articles on building confidence, separation anxiety, and nightmares.