

## **12 Tips to Reduce Your Child's Stress and Anxiety**

### **Parenting an anxious or stressed child**

Anxiety symptoms are common in children and adolescents, with 10-20% of school-aged children experiencing anxiety symptoms. An even larger number of children experience stress that does not qualify as an anxiety disorder. So how can you help to reduce your child's anxiety and stress?

#### **1) Encourage your child to face his/her fears, not run away from them.**

When we are afraid of situations we avoid them. However, avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations maintains the anxiety. Instead, if a child faces his or her fears, the child will learn that the anxiety reduces naturally on its own over time. The body cannot remain anxious for a very long period of time so there is a system in the body that calms the body down. Usually your anxiety will reduce within 20-45 minutes if you stay in the anxiety-provoking situation.

#### **2) Tell your child that it is okay to be imperfect.**

Often we feel that it is necessary for our children to succeed in sports, school, and performance situations. But sometimes we forget that kids need to be kids. School becomes driven by grades, not by enjoyment of learning if an 85 is good, but not good enough. This is not to say that striving is not important. It is important to encourage your child to work hard but equally important to accept and embrace your child's mistakes and imperfections.

#### **3) Focus on the positives.**

Many times anxious and stressed children can get lost in negative thoughts and self-criticism. They may focus on how the glass is half empty instead of half-full and worry about future events. The more that you are able to focus on your child's positive attributes and the good aspects of a situation, the more that it will remind your child to focus on the positives.

#### **4) Schedule relaxing activities.**

Children need time to relax and be kids. Unfortunately, sometimes even fun activities, like sports, can become more about success than they are about fun. Instead, it is important to ensure that your child engages in play purely for the sake of fun. This may include scheduling

time each day for your child to play with toys, play a game, play a sport (without it being competitive), doing yoga, paint, have a tea party, put on a play, or just be silly.

### **5) Model approach behavior, self-care, and positive thinking.**

Your child will do what you do. So if you avoid anxiety-provoking situations, so will your child. If you face your fears, so will your child. If you take care of yourself and schedule time for your own needs, your child will learn that self-care is an important part of life. If you look for the positive in situations, so will your child. Children learn behaviors from watching their parents. So when you think about your child's psychological well-being think about your own as well.

### **6) Reward your child's brave behaviors.**

If your child faces his or her fears, reward this with praise, a hug, or even something tangible like a sticker or a small treat. This is not bribery if you establish this as a motivator prior to your child being in the situation. If you reward behaviors your child will engage in them more often.

### **7) Encourage good sleep hygiene.**

Set a bed time for your child and stick to that bed time even on weekends. Also have a 30-45 minute bed time routine that is done every night. This helps your child to transition from the activities of the day to the relaxed state necessary to fall asleep.

### **8) Encourage your child to express his/her anxiety.**

If your child says that he or she is worried or scared, don't say "No you're not!" or "You're fine." That doesn't help your child. Instead, it is likely to make your child believe that you do not listen or do not understand him/her. Instead, validate your child's experience by saying things like "Yes, you seem scared. What are you worried about?" Then have a discussion about your child's emotions and fears.

### **9) Help your child to problem solve.**

Once you have validated your child's emotions and demonstrated that you understand your child's experience and are listening to what your child has to say, help your child to problem solve. This does not mean solving the problem for your child. It means helping your child to

identify possible solutions. If your child can generate solutions, that is great. If not, generate some potential solutions for your child and ask your child to pick the solution that he or she thinks would work best.

### **10) Stay calm.**

Children look to their parents to determine how to react in situations. We've all seen a young child trip and fall and then look to their parent to see how to react. If the parent seems concerned, the child cries. This is because the child is looking to their parent for a signal of how to react to the situation. Children of all ages pick up on their parent's emotions and resonate with them. If you are anxious, your child will pick up on that anxiety and experience an increase in his/her own anxiety. So when you want to reduce your child's anxiety, you must manage your own anxiety. This may mean deliberately slowing down your own speech, taking a few deep breaths to relax, and working to ensure that your facial expression conveys that you are calm.

### **11) Practice relaxation exercises with your child.**

Sometimes really basic relaxation exercises are necessary to help your child to reduce their stress and anxiety. This might mean telling your child to take a few slow, deep breaths (and you taking a few slow breaths with your child so your child can match your pace). Or it might mean asking your child to image him or herself somewhere relaxing, like the beach or relaxing in a backyard hammock. Ask your child to close his/her eyes and imagine the sounds, smells, and sensations associated with the image. For example, close your eyes and picture yourself on a beach. Listen to the sound of the surf as the waves come in and go out. In and out. Listen to the sound of the seagulls flying off in the distance. Now focus on the feel of the warm sand beneath your fingers and the sun warming your skin. Your child can do these techniques on his or her own during anxiety-provoking times.

### **12) Never give up!**

Anxiety and stress can be a chronic struggle and often the source of a child's anxiety changes over time so it can feel as though you are always putting out fires. With repetition of the anxiety and stress management techniques, your child will learn how to lower his/her anxiety level and how to cope with anxiety-provoking situations. The key is repetition so keep it up!