

How to help your child develop their confidence (in other words, to be less anxious)

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Dear Parents,

I often get asked about how parents can help their children with anxiety. The first thing for everyone to know is that **anxiety is a normal**. We all have it. Its role is to keep us safe and it helps us to stay alert and be careful when we think there might be 'danger'. Imagine if your child wasn't scared of anything...

All emotions come in varying degrees. We might be a tiny bit worried, quite concerned, very anxious or petrified. These all feel different in our bodies, and it is these feelings that help us understand our levels of emotion. **Anxiety isn't nearly so much of a problem if we know how to manage it.** It becomes a problem if we don't know how to manage it, and if it stops us getting on with our everyday life.



Just like any uncomfortable emotion, people need to learn how to manage anxiety, and as with any emotion, **parents play a key role in teaching their children how to manage their worries.** When we help children to understand and manage their anxious feelings, we teach them to become more confident.

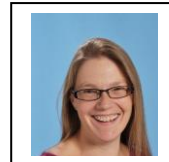
My favourite ways of helping children to understand their feelings and to become more confident are listed below. Perhaps have a read through and pick one to have a go at with your child, then add another... This can be more effective (and less overwhelming) than trying to do them all at once!

- 1) **Tell your child how to manage new situations before they get there.** Tell them what to think, do and say that will help them manage the situation confidently. Help your child,
 - visualise where they are going and what they will do and see. Pictures, discussion, role play all work to help the new thing be less of a worrying mystery and more predictable. With this familiarity we become more confident.
 - think about times when they've managed similar things. What did they do to help themselves manage last time? Can they do any of those things again?
- 2) **Make sure your child knows how to ask for help.** They should also know who can help them and what those people will do. This might mean meeting with other adults involved in the situation and agreeing a plan.
- 3) **Help your child spot when they are a little bit anxious.** Gently telling them what you've noticed about their behaviour and give them a strategy to use. E.g. "You seem a bit quiet/bouncy. I wonder if you are a bit worried about? Keep telling yourself you've done this before, that Mrs X is there to help you, and that we'll have a good hug after school."
- 4) **Teach your child to exhale and think positive thoughts** when they feel anxious. This helps calm the brain down and makes it easier to think straight.



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Well done, I could see you a bit nervous about going. You helped yourself be brave by thinking positive thoughts.

5) **Regularly comment on their positive attributes** as this will help them have a positive self-concept and to be more confident. When your child has done something that you thought might make them anxious, praise them and comment for example on how brave they were. If you can tell how they managed to do it.

6) **Make sure you find out positives and what has been going well.** Talk about these things with your child. This should boost their confidence. If you only talk about the worries, that might be all you hear about, and their worries then might get bigger. Bear in mind that if you ask a question like “how was your day?” it is entirely possible that the problematic things will spring to mind first, and you won’t find out the good stuff. We need to keep a healthy balance between thinking of the worrying things and the positive things.

7) **Help them divide what might seem like a huge step into smaller much more manageable ones.** This is particularly good if thinking about a new situation seems overwhelming. Make a list of the steps and then take one step at a time. If need be just change one small element of what you are doing. When you child feels successful and confident with one step, move to the next. Celebrate each step of success with your child 😊



8) **Help them evaluate whether their worry is a big one** (which deserves a big reaction) or a small one (which only deserves a small reaction). What would a reasonable size reaction look like?



9) **Show your child how to manage worries.** If you are worried about something (and it’s appropriate for your child to know about it) talk out loud about how you are feeling, what you are thinking and talk out loud about what you are going to do to help yourself feel better. This way they can see what they can do.

10) **If you regularly find yourself reassuring your child about the same thing asking them to guess what you might say.** This way they begin to learn to reassure themselves. If you aren’t with them, find ways of reminding them about what you might say. Thinking of you when they worries is likely to make them more confident.

If you have given the above strategies a really good go, and your child is still struggling to engage in everyday activities, it might be time to ask for more help through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (known as CAMHS). Their job is to help you support your child’s well-being. Your school or GP can help you request support, though there may be quite a waiting list. CAMHS have a lot of information about successfully managing anxiety on their web page for parents and young people.

<https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs/advice/self-help/>

I hope these that these strategies will help you and your child be more confident.

With best wishes

Bryony