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## Anxiety in Kids: How to Turn it Around and Protect Them For Life

Anxiety is a normal response to something dangerous or stressful. It becomes a problem when it shows up at unexpected times and takes a particularly firm hold. When anxiety is in full swing, it feels awful. Awful enough that anticipation of the feeling is enough in itself to cause anxiety. We already know that anxiety has nothing to do with strength, courage or character. It picks a target and it switches on.

When that target is a child or teen, it can be particularly distressing, causing problems with sleeping, eating and missed school from unexplained illnesses such as sick tummies or headaches.

One of the worst things about anxiety is the way it can happen without any identifiable cause. The physical feeling is familiar – that panicked feeling that comes when you miss a stair or that feeling you get when you're almost asleep and you feel like you're falling.

The good news is that anxiety in kids is very treatable and they are particularly responsive. Children are so open to possibility, and very quick to make the right connections when they're given the right information and support. As the adult in their life, parents are the perfect one to give it.

### 1. **Don't talk them out of it.**

As a parent, the temptation is to reassure your child with gentle comments in the way of, 'There's nothing to worry about,' or 'You'll be fine'. This comes from the purest of intentions but it runs the risk of them feeling as though there's something wrong with them. The truth is that when anxiety has a hold of them, they can no sooner stop worrying than fly to the moon. As much as they want to believe you, their brains just won't let them.

What they need to hear is that you get it. Ask them what it feels like for them. They may or may not be able to articulate – and that's okay. Then, ask if it's 'like that feeling you get when you miss a stair,' (or 'that feeling you get when you feel like you're falling in your sleep'). Often, this in itself is such a relief because 'someone gets it.'

### 2. **Normalise.**

Explain that:

- Anxiety is normal and everyone experiences anxiety at some time in their life – before an exam, when meeting new people, going for an interview or starting at a new school.
- Sometimes it happens for no reason at all. That's also normal. It happens to lots of adults and lots of kids but there are things you can do to make it go away.

### 3. **Explain why anxiety feels like it does.**

Out of everything, this is perhaps the most powerful intervention for anyone with anxiety. Anxiety causes the most problems when it seems to come on without any real trigger. Anxiety happens because there's a part of your brain that thinks there's something it needs to protect you from. The part of the brain is called the amygdala. It's not very big and it's shaped like an almond. It switches on when it thinks you're in danger, so really it's like your own fierce warrior, there to protect you. Its job is to get you ready to run away from the danger or fight it. People call this 'fight or flight'.

If your amygdala thinks there's trouble, it will immediately give your body what it needs to be strong, fast and powerful. It will flood your body with oxygen, hormones and adrenaline that your body can use as fuel to power your muscles to run away or fight. It does this without even thinking. This happens so quickly and so automatically. So when the amygdala senses a threat it floods your body with oxygen, adrenaline and hormones that your body can use to fuel its fight or flight. Explain how common anxiety is in adults and kids.

About 1 in 8 kids have struggled with anxiety – so let them know that in their class, there's a good chance that 3 or 4 other kids would know exactly what they're going through because they've been through it before. Maybe they're going through it right now.

### 4. **Give it a Name.**

'Now that you understand that your anxiety feelings come from the 'heroic warrior' part of your brain, let's give it a name.' Let your child pick the name and ask them what they think of when they picture it. This will help them to feel as though something else is the problem, not them. It also demystifies their anxiety. Rather than it being a nameless, faceless 'thing' that gets in their way, it's something contained – with a name and a look.

To view this article in full (and the remainder of the advice) [click here](#).

Remember that anxiety in kids is very treatable but it might take time. Explain to your child that his or her very clever and very protective brain might need some convincing that just because it thinks there's trouble coming, doesn't mean there is. Keep practicing and they'll get there.

*We provide our students with the skills to become confident and capable global citizens.*