

5 Secret Ingredients to Help Your Child Overcome Anxiety

Before we jump into strategies, let's first define anxiety. Anxiety is the emotion we feel when we are faced with PERCEIVED danger. This occurs when we overestimate the dangers of a potential situation while underestimating our ability to cope with it.

This means that your child's body reacts to seemingly harmless situations because your child expects that there is a real threat of danger. Your child's body will sound the alarms that danger is present. This causes them to experience a shot of adrenaline to either fight the danger, run from the danger, or just freeze in sheer terror.

Sometimes it can be very hard to tell if our children are feeling anxious. Not all of our children can put words to their emotions. You might be able to tell your child has anxiety if they:

- Ask lots of questions entering new or unfamiliar situations
- Express "what if" scenarios of something bad happening
- Have frequent unexplained stomach or head aches
- Complain of pain
- Are irritable or angry
- Cry or withdrawal
- Kick, throw things, scream

Now that you have some of the basics on anxiety, let's dive into some strategies.

1) Teach Your Child How Worries Get Stuck

To start, let your child know that anxiety is normal and validate their emotions. Tell them, "I see you're worried or afraid right now. It's ok, all kids feel afraid at different times too." For instance, most children are afraid to get shots, sleep over at a friend's house for the first time, or be in a dark room

alone. Fears can help protect us, and we need them. However, sometimes our worries get stuck in our brain, and they just don't want to go away.

In cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), we teach kids the chain reaction that occurs with our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. To help your child, have them identify the thoughts they are having in a situation that might trigger anxiety. Then, identify the behavior that follows. For all children, their anxiety is so scary to them, that they immediately engage in behaviors to escape the situation. It is important for us to let our kids know that anxiety grows bigger in their lives through avoidance. Why? Because each time they avoid, they are saying to anxiety, I believe you. The more they listen to it, the more it takes control.

2) Teach Your Child to Relax and Unplug their Alarms

“Anxiety can jump out in an instant, like a bogeyman in a Halloween haunted house. In just a few seconds, it is all systems go,” Ellen Hendricksen, Ph.D. in “How to Be Yourself.” For our kids (and us!), that feeling of anxiety can come out of nowhere and be terrifying. Their bodies sound the alarm that danger is near, and then comes the adrenaline. In turn, your child might feel faint, cry, sweat, tremble, feel dizzy, or have fast heartbeats. Let your child know that what they are experiencing is real and the feelings are very uncomfortable.

You can help your child by giving them different techniques to counteract this fear response in their body. You can teach them relaxation tools that they can use to tell their body, “Nope, I’m safe here. I got this.” Some relaxation strategies that we love are belly breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery. (You can see examples of some of these relaxation strategies by visiting Ms. Kristin’s virtual counseling office [here](#).)

3) Give Worry a Silly Name and Talk Back to It!

Sometimes anxiety can feel like it is who we are and a part of us. We want our kids to feel like anxiety is something that is NOT a part of them. To do this, we like to have kids give their anxiety a name—the sillier the better! The Stinky

Bully, The Grouchy Monster, The Overreactor, Mr. Nag, etc. It's not only fun to make it silly, but it also lightens the mood when talking about a subject that can feel scary. It's hard to feel worried when you are laughing, so have fun with this!

Rather than reassuring your child, when they are anxious you might ask, *"What is Stinky Bully telling you will happen if we go in the restaurant? Do you believe Stinky Bully? Are there things that might tell you Stinky Bully is wrong?"* Try communicating to your child that worry is not to be trusted.

Trade Reassurance for Questions

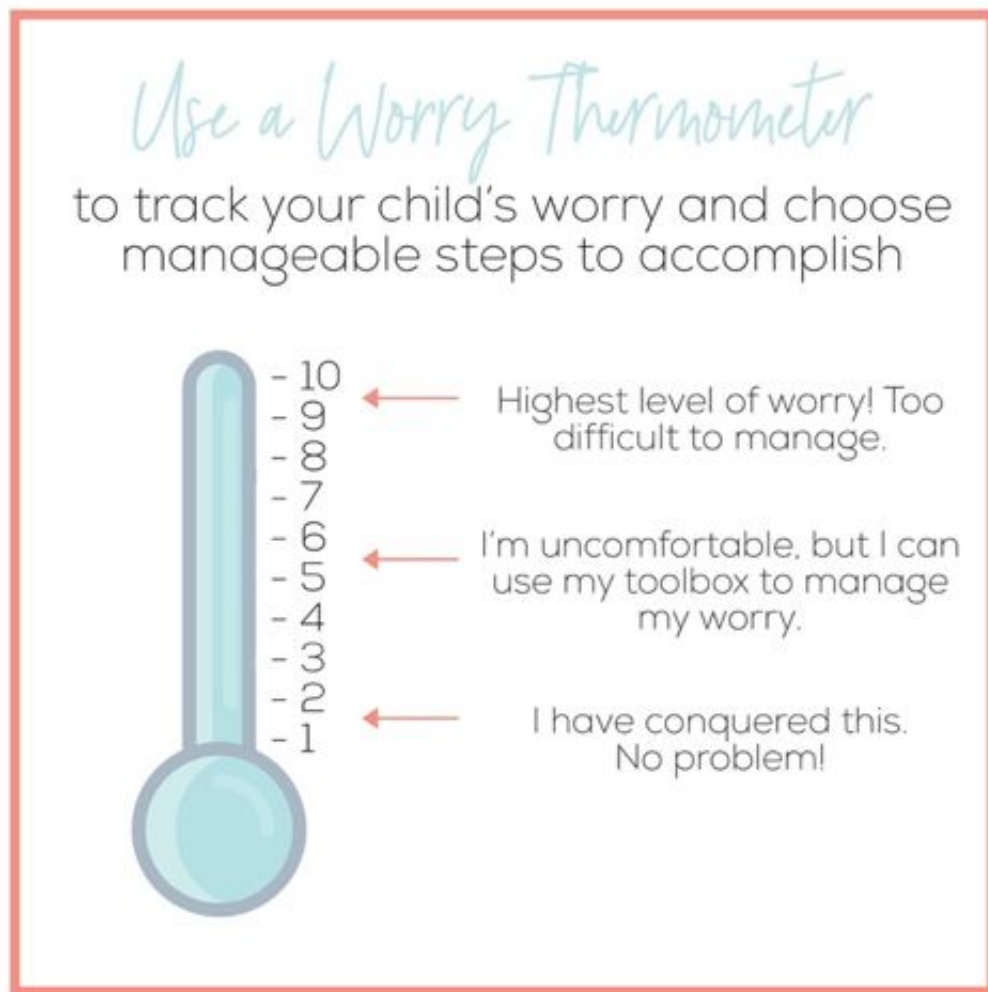
Trade this...	...for this
Don't worry.	What is worry telling you?
There's nothing to be afraid of.	Is that what you really think? Why?
You're fine.	What does the non-worry part of you know/think?
Look, your brother isn't scared.	Do you think that's really true? Why or why not?
	What do you think is most likely?

(Chansky, 2014)

4) Use a Worry Thermometer

To learn more about a worry, use a worry thermometer. Some children like a 0-10 scale and some prefer 0-5. On a scale of 0 (totally calm no worry) to 5 (the

worst anxiety he could imagine), identify your child's fear in specific situations.



5) Create A Worry Ladder and Start Climbing It!

Also you can create a worry ladder and put the easiest situations on the bottom and the hardest ones at the top. Based on that information, plan to create a series of worry challenges throughout the week.

Encourage your child to try using breathing exercises when in these challenging situations. Do very short periods of time in each of these

situations, gradually increasing the time. You can also give jobs in these situations to help a child shift focus from his or her internal feelings.

When you have your child take small steps and do challenges, the goal should be to stay in those challenges until your child's anxiety goes back down (e.g., worry = 5 to worry = 1 or 2). If your child does the challenge and then leaves right away, your child will only remember that heightened feeling of anxiety. When doing a challenge, remember that anxiety spikes quickly, but it always goes back down. In most cases, the anxiety should start to lessen over the course of several minutes as your child adjusts and realized they can cope with the situation.

Remember, as you start to do challenges with your child there will be setbacks. Try to be understanding and put it aside for the day. Most importantly, make sure you provide lots of praise and rewards when your child makes the effort to start facing fears. This takes amazing courage and your child should receive lots of positive feedback along with tangible rewards. Talk to your child about things they would like to earn as they take small steps up their worry ladder.

This excerpt was taken from an article by Lori Long, retrieved on February 23, 2021 at

<https://www.thechildhoodcollective.com/blog/5-secret-ingredients-to-help-your-child-overcome-anxiety>

****PLEASE NOTE:** Anxiety levels are increasing right now with many of our families. If you have concerns about your child's anxiety rising to a level where it is interfering with his or her daily functioning (e.g. eating, sleeping, getting ready for school each day), it is important to get professional help for your child right away. I would be happy to help you with making a referral to a community counselor who can help your child - please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

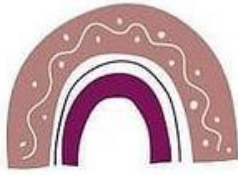
Kristin Dickerson, M.S.

OLG School Counselor

kdickerson@guadalupe-school.org

8 THINGS TO SAY TO AN ANXIOUS CHILD

@teenhealthdoc x @mamapsychologists



You are
safe with
me



It's ok to feel
nervous,
I do too
sometimes



Let's go
for a walk



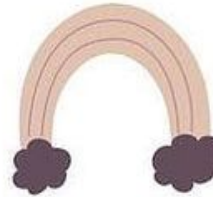
Let's draw the
worry, how
big is it?



Let's talk back
to this worry



I am here
for you



Let's sit
together until
the thought
passes



Let's take a
few deep
breaths
together