

Intervention Guide Parent Tip Sheet



Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition

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Were you afraid of the dark as a child? Many people were, even though most of us had little to fear. Being afraid of the dark is very common, and children often grow out of this fear quickly. Sometimes, fear or stress can be healthy. For example, being afraid of getting hit by a car helps us pay close attention when crossing a busy street. But for some children, fear or stress can begin to disrupt daily activities.

Children who have too much fear or stress may be suffering from **anxiety** problems. These children may be overly nervous or fearful in many different settings. They may constantly worry about many different things or may seem to take things too seriously. Too much worrying can cause restlessness or trouble sleeping. Too much worrying can also cause a child to feel very critical of himself or herself. In extreme cases, a child may resist or refuse to go places.

Anxiety can be caused by many factors, including:

- a fearful experience
- a major life event
- a generally nervous temperament

Teaching new coping skills is key to helping your child deal with his or her anxiety.

Children can become anxious for a lot of reasons. Some fears can be traced back to a specific event. For example, your child may be afraid of dogs because he or she was once chased by a neighborhood dog. Children can have trouble understanding that not all fears are reasonable and that one scary dog doesn't mean that all dogs should be feared. Another cause of anxiety might be a stressful time in a child's

life. Moving to a new city or a change in the family, such as a divorce or a death, can cause a child to become worried about the future. Whether the causes are known or unknown, anxiety usually leads to feelings that are quite real and that need to be dealt with.

Too much anxiety can harm children in many ways. They may experience problems in school because their anxiety makes it hard to concentrate on class work or ask others for help. They may be unwilling to try new things or to spend time with friends. For other children, feeling anxious or nervous can result in a need for things to always be "perfect." This expectation can make children become extremely critical of themselves. These children may need a lot of extra praise and reassurance from you or others that everything is okay.

Dealing With Anxiety

Anxiety in children can appear as:

- nervousness
- fearfulness
- worrying
- acting too serious
- a constant need for reassurance
- muscle tension

Strategies that can help your child include:

- positive storytelling
- rewarding brave behavior
- evaluating the worst-case scenario
- teaching self-relaxation



It can be difficult to have a child with anxiety problems. A child's fears can often seem strange or silly to an adult. Dealing with your child's fears can be frustrating, especially when the things you say and do to comfort your child don't seem to work. Your child probably doesn't know that his or her fears are unusual or that they can be controlled. You can help your child learn to recognize the difference between real and imaginary threats.

This tip sheet provides information that might be helpful for changing your child's anxious behaviors and emotions. You and others can help your child understand and manage feelings of excessive worry or fear.

The following pages discuss approaches that will give you the tools you need to help you change your child's behavior.

Working With Your Child

Talking with your child about his or her anxiety can be difficult. However, it is an important step to understanding why your child has too much tension and stress and what may be the best way to help. Your child may not be willing to talk much about his or her feelings. Starting a conversation shows your child that his or her feelings are important to you. Listening and developing a plan to help shows that you are committed to making things better.

There are many things you can do to help make the conversation easier. For example, talk with your child during a time that is **unhurried** and in a place that is **free from distractions** to show your child that the conversation is important.

When talking with your child about his or her anxiety, make sure to:

- choose a time that is unhurried and a place that is free from distractions
- keep the conversation brief
- maintain a positive and calm attitude
- focus on one situation at a time

Did you know?

- Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental, emotional, and behavioral problems to occur during childhood and adolescence.
- About 13 of every 100 children and adolescents, ages 9 to 17, experience some kind of anxiety disorder.
- Nearly half of children and adolescents with anxiety disorders have a second anxiety disorder or other mental or behavioral disorder, such as depression.

Try to **keep the conversation short**. You will be the best judge of how long your child will be able to pay attention to the conversation, but you might want to keep your first conversation to no more than 10 minutes.

When speaking with your child, try to maintain a **positive and calm** attitude. Try not to judge your child's thoughts and feelings. If you become frustrated and upset when talking with your child, he or she may be unwilling to talk to you about his or her feelings. Instead, stay relaxed to provide a good example for your child to follow.

During the conversation, **pick one situation at a time** to discuss. Focus on talking about your child's anxious emotions rather than your child's behavior. Keep in mind that your child may misinterpret his or her behavior as a personal weakness. Your child may be feeling like "everything's wrong," so listen to what your child is saying. Avoid interrupting, even if what your child says seems unrealistic to you. Following these suggestions will help you and your child stay focused on the solution.

With the following strategies, it can be helpful to provide examples. Make sure the examples you use are meaningful to your child. Use examples of situations or behaviors that your child has experienced. The conversations you have with your child about his or her anxiety may help you decide what kinds of examples will be helpful.



Positive Storytelling

A child may struggle with worry in general. Parents can help by creating a narrative or “story” around an event so that a child has a way to successfully navigate the situation that is causing worry.

1. Identify one occasion that causes worry. For example, getting on the bus going to school, or walking into a large room of people.
2. Create a story describing your child as the main character, successfully walking through the situation. Use as many details as you can. Describe what your child is doing, feeling, or even wearing. The descriptions should be positive. The worry may even be visualized as a cartoon character. For example, Susan gets on the school bus carrying her favorite yellow backpack, she climbs the steps 1, 2, 3 and sees “Worry” peeking over the head of the bus driver. “Worry” is a fuzzy, gray ball with legs like a chicken. Susan snaps her fingers two times by her side and makes “Worry” disappear in a puff of smoke. Susan feels her stomach relax, and she walks to her seat on the bus.
3. Teach your child to think of the story when he or she starts to worry in another situation. Provide positive feedback when your child uses the story.

EXAMPLE:

When Josef hears thunder, he hides in his closet. Josef’s father sat with him after dinner and told a story about space travel. Josef loved any story with stars or planets. His father asked Josef to imagine himself in his own spaceship, with its curved windows, its dials and levers, and the black space and stars outside. Josef’s father asked him to imagine a planet exploding. It was loud, like thunder, but Josef wasn’t afraid because his spaceship kept him safe. Josef’s father had him imagine his spaceship during the next storm, and Josef felt braver when he heard thunder.

Rewarding Brave Behavior

A child may avoid activities due to feeling anxious or fearful. A parent can encourage a child to face situations by using rewards.

1. Make a list of brave behaviors with your child. For example, if your child is afraid of water, it might be brave just to put in one foot at the edge of the pool. When possible, do the activity with your child at first; then gradually withdraw, encouraging your child to go more on his or her own. For each behavior, include some smaller and greater steps that seem reasonable to you.
2. Choose rewards for each behavior. If your child is older, let him or her suggest what feels like a reward worth the risk. Be sure that the rewards are realistic, available immediately when your child earns them, and of great value to your child.
3. Set a time frame. Discuss how soon your child is willing to try at least one behavior. If he or she hesitates, consider setting a target date yourself and offer a special reward for one specific behavior.
4. Be generous with your praise. When your child earns a reward, tell him or her that you are proud and encourage taking the next bigger step. When the new behavior becomes more common and rewards are no longer needed, your child will still appreciate your praise.

EXAMPLE:

Nadia has always been shy, and her eighth-grade teacher asks every student to make speeches. Nadia often complains of a headache and misses school on days when it’s her turn to talk in front of the class. Nadia’s mom talks with her about feeling the same way in high school. They agree on some rewards for taking small steps and facing her fear. If she goes to school without complaints on speech days, she would be excused from washing dishes that night. When she gives a speech, she could spend extra time with her friends at the mall. When she passes the class, she could choose a new music CD or a DVD.

Evaluating the Worst-Case Scenario

A child may feel anxiety without logical explanation or may see catastrophe that is highly unlikely. A parent can help by showing how unlikely the worst-case scenario is or by providing reassurance.

1. Ask your child to tell you “what is the worst thing that can happen.” Then, listen to your child talk about a situation or fear. Listen for any all-or-nothing statements about the bad things that might happen (e.g., saying, “Everyone will hate me,” or “No one ever believes me”).
2. Ask your child if these things can really happen or about the likelihood that they might really happen. Encourage realistic thinking by asking, “Then what?” and listen for reasonable responses.
3. Describe your child’s concerns using less extreme language, or discuss how likely something is to happen. For example, if your child says, “If he won’t answer my call, I’ll die of embarrassment,” you might suggest, “Do you really think you would die? What would actually happen next?” Give ideas for more realistic outcomes if your child is frustrated or upset.
4. Continue until the worst-case scenario becomes something your child can manage. If you end up with a positive outcome instead of a negative one, remind your child how this is the result of his or her approach to the situation.

Listen carefully and try not to judge your child’s responses. The goal is to help your child to discover that even the worst outcome can be endured and won’t last forever.

EXAMPLE:

Deshawn complained a lot about his after-school job and was critical of himself. He said that the other workers at the library didn’t like him. “What is the worst thing that could happen if all your co-workers don’t like you?” his father asked. He suggested Deshawn could ask for tasks he could do by himself. What if he couldn’t work alone? Deshawn realized that he could find another job. What if he couldn’t find another job? Deshawn and his father agreed that was unlikely but that he could do volunteer work instead. Once he saw that staying at the library was his choice, Deshawn decided to stay on and see what happens.

Teaching Self-Relaxation

A child can become overwhelmed with emotional feelings and not realize there are physical aspects to the body feeling stress. Parents can help a child learn to relax the body and reduce anxiety and worry.

1. Ask your child to remember the last time he or she felt anxious. Explain that your body sometimes gets ready for danger, like feeling a sudden urge to walk or run away from something, even when you’re really safe from harm.
2. Choose a relaxation signal. For example, when your child feels anxious, he or she could make tight fists. Then, your child could try to relax, starting with the hands, while taking slow deep breaths. Tell your child to notice if it is hard to feel afraid and relaxed at the same time.
3. Practice when and how to use relaxation. If there are times of day, such as before school, when fears set in, talk about how things will be different with this relaxation plan. Ask your child to act it out, like being in a play.
4. Give positive feedback about specific changes in your child’s behavior. If your child is young, you might give a small reward for helpful changes. Older children might value writing about these changes in a private journal or notebook.

Concentrating on relaxing may also distract your child from his or her fear for a few minutes. After this distraction, your child may see other choices more clearly and react differently to a stressful situation.

EXAMPLE:

Whenever Carly had to go to the doctor, she couldn’t sleep the night before her appointment. She would cry getting into the car, and in the waiting room she could feel her heart beating fast and her shoulders tensing up. Her mom helped Carly make a plan to relax when these feelings came on. Whenever she started to feel scared, she would make a tight fist. Then she would relax her hand and take some deep breaths and try to feel any other tight muscles, relaxing them as well. She could keep her eyes closed until she felt calm. Carly still doesn’t like the doctor’s office, but she can practice being calm at every step.



When should I expect my child to feel better?

The time it takes for feelings and behavior to change depends on both the severity of the anxiety and how long your child has been feeling this way. While the child may begin to understand how to manage his or her feelings, it can take time for actual changes in behavior to occur. Don't be surprised if you don't see an immediate change. One way to ensure change is to be consistent. It can be hard to find a quiet time to talk about how your child is feeling. But it's important to keep practicing the positive and calm thinking that will lead to change. If you don't notice a change, your child may need more help. Remember that there will always be times when your child feels frightened by events or situations in his or her life. This fear is normal for all children. As your child learns to face his or her fears, you should expect the difficult times not to last quite so long and that your child generally seems more at ease.

What should I do if I don't notice any change or if my child's behavior gets worse?

Think about how consistently you and your child have been about using a particular technique. Consider using different examples, or try asking more frequently how your child feels about his or her own progress. If your child's anxiety becomes worse, immediately consult with the person who gave you this tip sheet, even if you have a future appointment scheduled.



Where can I get more information?

Many books have been written for parents and teachers about how to understand and manage children's anxiety problems. The person who provided you with this tip sheet might be able to recommend books relevant to your child's age. If you have access to the Internet, the websites of the following organizations are good sources of information.

www.apa.org

The American Psychological Association's website has information that can help you understand your child's problems or locate a psychologist.

www.nasponline.org

The website of the National Association of School Psychologists contains information for families about different childhood behaviors and about the role of school psychologists in the diagnostic and treatment processes.

www.ed.gov

Many handouts, booklets, and online resources for parents, teachers, and others who care for and teach children can be found on the Department of Education website. This site also includes a link to the "What Works Clearinghouse" that features reports on the effectiveness of educational interventions.

www.healthychildren.org

From the American Academy of Pediatrics, this website has useful information on a variety of topics related to children's growth and physical and mental development.

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