

Calm and Confident Kids

Helping children manage worry, feel less stress and stay calm

Kirrilie Smout, *Developing Minds: Clinical Psychologists, specialising in working with kids and teens*

www.developingminds.net.au and www.calmkidcentral.com

Anxiety is one of the most common psychological disorder diagnosed in childhood

70% of children report having at least one personal worry

17% (1 in 6) have anxiety or worry which affects their daily lives.

WHAT MAKES KIDS WORRIED?

1. THEY ARE HUMAN BEINGS

- Designed to have anxiety response built in
- Tendency to think about things that are new, that could go wrong, that aren't good, that might hurt us.

2. THEY GO THROUGH TOUGH EXPERIENCES

- Grief and loss, Observing financial struggles, peer issues, bullying, illness, disability, learning problems and other family and environment challenges.

3. BIOLOGY

Research shows genetic component, brain and body differences and differences between anxious and less children in infancy. Some studies suggest 30% of people are "emotionally sensitive"

HELPING CHILDREN MANAGE WORRY AND ANXIETY

1. WARMTH AND EMPATHY

- I'm so sorry you're going through this
- I wish that hadn't happened for you.
- Oh no.....darn it. Such a bummer.
- This really sucks doesn't it
- I guess that must feel sad/scary/worrying
- If I was in your situation I would probably feel really upset about this
- Poor you! I'm so sorry.

Parental warmth (praise, love, expression of interest in their lives, expressing enjoyment of their presence etc) is associated with slightly less anxiety over time.

2. ASK SPECIFIC QUESTIONS ABOUT WORRIES

- It shows that we care
- It helps us know how to help
- It gives children an opportunity to practice expressing feelings and thoughts

Important to ask questions calmly and ask about the positives (if children get a message that we are anxious about their worries, they become more anxious over time).

SOME EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS WE CAN ASK:

- Are you feeling a little worried or very worried?
- When did you first start feeling worried?
- Are you just anxious or do you feel cross as well?
- What do you think made you feel most worried?
- When did you notice yourself feeling scared?
- How does your body feel?
- What do you think might go wrong?

- What is the most scary thing about this?
- What do you wish was different?
- Are you worried about what people might think?
- What have you heard about that might be a problem?
- What do you think will happen/not happen?
- What do you think might go wrong?
- What is the most scary thing about this?
- What do you wish was different?
- Are you worried about what people might think?
- What have you heard about that might be a problem?
- What do you think will happen/not happen?
- What did you enjoy today?
- What are you looking forward to?
- What did you do best at school today?
- Who was nice/being kind to you?
- When did you feel safe and happy?
- What made you feel more relaxed about that

3. HELP THEM LOWER THEIR PHYSIOLOGICAL “FIGHT OR FLIGHT” RESPONSES

- Calm voices/face
- Touch
- Noticing/Distraction
- Helping child to slow breathing
- Helping child to relax muscles

4. HELP THEM LEARN TO REASSURE **THEMSELVES** (USE CALM WORDS/SENTENCES)

Think of the thing/situation that makes you worried.

- How likely/likely is that?
- Why is it not likely?
- How terrible is that?
- Why is it not terrible?
- What could you do if that happened?
- What might be one thing about this situation that helps you feel calmer?
- What is something positive or helpful or safe about this that it helps to remember?
- If your friend/younger brother/sister was in this situation, what might you say to make them feel better?

Help child prepare these in advance (Usually not effective in the height of distress). Write up coping/reassuring statements for the fridge – reward and praise for using. Can be helpful to have a visual representation of these (ie write them down/drawings/cartoons)

5. ENCOURAGE AND ENFORCE BRAVE BEHAVIOUR

The more children avoid anxious situations over time, or are protected from scary (but safe) experiences, the more anxious they become over time. Anxious children need support to act confidently and take (age appropriate) responsibility for increasing numbers of life areas.

Tips for getting kids to do scary things:

- Small steps towards and short periods of being brave
- Reward and praise brave behaviour
- Make being brave as fun as possible
- Help them notice **you** being brave (I was nervous but I wanted to do....)
- Be compassionate, but **gently unrelenting!** *It's okay for them to be scared.*
- Teach ways of coping with being scared
- Have both external and internal sources of distraction ready/practiced
- Speak confidently and cheerfully to children about situations they are worried about
- Avoid rescuing or helping them avoid situations (which are safe and manageable)

5. HELP THEM LEARN TO REDIRECT THEIR ATTENTION

- Prepare in advance (explain)
- Ask children to do it for short periods of time initially