# **Helping Your Child Cope with Situational Anxiety**

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For children of any age, anxiety can strike without warning. Typically, children experience symptoms of anxiety when in new situations, when there is a perception of potential pain, or when your child fears that they will be separated from you. Routine visits to medical professionals, drop-offs at school, or other changes to your child’s daily routine can all trigger feelings of anxiety. Despite your best efforts to prepare your child for a new situation, they may still experience mild, moderate or even severe anxiety in these circumstances. Every child will show signs of anxiety in different ways, but typical symptoms include changes in their activity level, sweaty palms, weak legs, stomach pain, headache, or behavioral cues such as crying, nail-biting, hair-pulling, or head-banging. No matter the situation that has triggered your child’s anxiety, there are strategies you can use to help them work through this feeling and prevent future episodes.

The first step in addressing anxiety with your child is to help them notice the changes in their body and behavior. As gently as possible, point out to your child the behaviors you are observing and ask if they notice them too. For example, if your child begins to bite their nails when they are nervous, try the following phrase: “I can see you are biting your nails right now. Did you notice that?” By neutrally addressing the behavior, you are helping them to pay attention to how their body responds to stress. Although you may be frustrated by their actions, refrain from disciplining your child as this can cause feelings of shame that may reinforce anxiety-related behaviors.

Next, help your child understand that feelings of anxiety are normal and that everyone’s behavior or mood changes when they feel this way. Explain to your child in terms they can understand how situations that make us uncomfortable can cause stress and anxiety, and that these feelings can make our heads and bodies hurt. Explain that people (including yourself) all feel stress and anxiety at times and that it feels different for everyone. For example, you can try saying the following: “I don’t like having to talk to new people either. Sometimes if I feel nervous about it, my hands and feet get really sweaty.” Help your child understand that there is nothing wrong with feeling anxious – it’s just our body’s way of letting us know it is uncomfortable.

Once you’ve helped your child to recognize anxiety and have normalized this feeling, you can now help your child relax. Your first step is to talk with your child about what is making them feel anxious about a situation and try to alleviate those fears verbally if possible. For example, your child may become extremely agitated in a doctor’s waiting room out of fear of receiving a shot, having the doctor touch them with a cold stethoscope, or because they are worried about what their weight will be. Talking with your child about what is bothering them will not only clarify what the actual problem is but will give you the opportunity to provide accurate information about what they can expect. If your child continues to have anxiety symptoms, use a stress reduction technique to help alleviate the feelings. Some of the most effective methods for children include breathing exercises, guided imagery and the reassuring physical presence of a parent.

As a last resort, it may be necessary to walk away from the stressful situation and try again another time. If your child is having a screaming tantrum or is showing signs of a panic attack, it is best to get them to a place where they are feeling safe. Don’t force your child to do something that’s unnecessarily causing them fear. A child that is frightened of heights should not be forced to peer over the edge of a tall structure; a child that is terrified of clowns should not be coaxed into posing for a picture with one. Children who experience these kinds of forced interventions are more likely to develop ingrained phobias and resentment. Instead, encourage your child to take small steps to overcome their situational anxiety over time.

If your child’s anxiety becomes so intrusive that they are unable to participate in appropriate and necessary activities, or if it is so chronic that it prohibits them from having a healthy social life, reach out to your child’s pediatrician for guidance. Signs that you may want to seek professional help include your child’s refusal to participate in school, an inability to maintain healthy sleep habits, abnormal changes in appetite (such as binge eating or refusing to eat), the use of substances as a coping mechanism, or changes in mental functioning.

As a parent, you are the most significant influence on your child’s ability to cope with anxiety. By providing your child with the language to label this feeling, normalizing it, and providing your child with relaxation techniques, you are building up your child’s resilience in the face of future stressful events.

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