

# Preventing Anxiety Problems in Children and Youth

by Ron Old

**Hearing a lot about anxiety in children and youth?**

**Wondering how to support your child to manage their emotions?**

**These ideas can help your child develop the knowledge and skills they need before more serious problems arise.**

It sometimes feels like we can hardly pick up a paper, turn on the radio, or check our news feed without coming across another feature on the crisis of mood and anxiety problems in children and youth. Naturally, as parents and guardians, we become concerned for our own children, and want to protect them from such struggles. Fortunately, there are steps we can take to help our children learn ways to regulate and cope with their own emotional reactions, and develop a more empowered self-concept.

It is important to note that fear, worry, and shyness are normal parts of childhood. Not all difficult emotions mean a child is developing anxiety. However, if your child is starting to show what may seem like highly emotional reactions to fairly minor challenges or setbacks, keeping the following ideas in mind can help you manage the situation and support your child to develop coping strategies to reduce such reactions over time.

It's also important to recognize that supporting our children through challenges is not simple or straightforward. Every child and their situation is unique. No list of tips is going to immediately solve the issue. Remain patient and persistent, explore and experiment with different strategies, and don't get down on yourself (or the child) if the situation doesn't improve as quickly as you'd like.

## **1. Gather yourself and stay calm**

Children are sensitive and reactive to the emotions and energy of those around them, especially their parents and guardians. (Indeed, that's true of all of us. This is an aspect of one of our most fundamental needs as humans... to feel connected to others. Our sensitivity is a survival skill that we have evolved over time.) When the adult remains calm it can help reassure the child that things are not as bad or difficult as they may seem and that a solution is possible, even if we don't know what it is yet.

That, of course, isn't always as easy as it sounds. It's sometimes difficult to do *because* we care so much. Seeing our children struggle emotionally can be very upsetting. It can make us question our parenting and fear for their future. Things that are *that* important to us will always cause the largest emotional reactions, so it's essential that as parents and guardians we also

develop our own strategies for managing our emotions, and getting ourselves into a frame of mind where we can be a positive support to the child.

Recognizing that our own emotional needs are an important part of the solution can also contribute to a fundamental shift in how we think about the situation. We move away from ideas like “my child has a problem that must be fixed,” and toward a conception more like “learning to manage feelings is a natural part of life, but it’s hard and complex, and we all need to work at it”. This can help the child feel less isolated and embarrassed by their struggles, and lead to more open communication.

## **2. Model and talk about mental hygiene and self-care**

Our frame of mind needs maintenance in the same way our physical health does. Make yourself a priority. A quiet bath with candles. A loud nightclub with friends. Yoga. Channel surfing. The gym. A nap. Meditation. Screaming your head off. You’ve likely heard many different ideas for finding your best self, and the internet abounds with suggestions, but much of the benefit may come from simply making the decision that you’re worth it.

It can also be helpful to take time out for more reflective times, either by ourselves or with people we trust. Creating opportunities to contemplate and understand our own emotional life in greater depth is an important component of maintaining health. Whatever recharges your batteries, creating the occasional break for yourself will help you be more ready to manage those situations when your child is struggling.

But who’s got time for any of that when you’ve got kids, right? Actually, some of the most powerful self-care techniques take no extra time at all. They have to do with our habits of mind; our conscious thoughts and what we choose to pay attention to are remarkably powerful.

It is common to devote a fair amount of mental energy and attention to the various shortcomings we may perceive in ourselves, others, or the world in general. Worrying about possible future misfortunes is also not an uncommon thought process. For many people, these are kind of their default mental settings, and they can become habits of thought, with a host of negative effects on both mental and physical health. However, many positive effects have been found from learning to notice and then let go of this negative internal monologue, and deliberately re-focusing our conscious thoughts onto our blessings, our gratitude, and our compassion.

Ever buy a new car, and suddenly you see the same model everywhere? Think they weren’t there before? Of course not. Our attention is remarkably selective... we see what we’re looking for. The same applies to the positive aspects of our lives that can emotionally nurture and sustain us, if we let them. By deliberately choosing to notice positives within and all around us, we bring their existence into our awareness and open ourselves to the healing power that such experiences can have. You may even find, as I have, that your external world starts to reflect

your inner thoughts, and that an increase in positive experiences will start to happen in your day-to-day life. Maybe, just like the cars, they were there all along.

No single technique or approach to mental health maintenance will work for everyone. You'll want to experiment and develop your own strategies over time. Notice and celebrate small gains, and pride yourself on just making the effort to look after yourself. Even an unsuccessful strategy brings us closer to one that will help. One idea is to focus your attention on creating the solution that you want to see, rather than ruminating on the problem itself. As far as you are comfortable, and within the boundaries of your own judgement, discuss your own self-care practices with your children, and ask about how they manage different challenges and experiences in their lives.

### **3. The child is the expert on themselves**

In much the same way, no single approach will work for every child. It is important to help the child tune in to their own physical and emotional feelings, try out different strategies to calm and re-focus themselves, and evaluate their effectiveness. Your role as parent is to remain engaged, facilitate the process of learning and trying the technique, offer emotional support and encouragement, and make suggestions. It is not your responsibility to fix the problem, as much as you may want to. Learning to manage their emotions is like any other learning we want for the child; if we give too much help all the time, they're not going to get that good at it themselves. We need to seek an appropriate balance of support vs. independence, which can be difficult; it's hard to know when to move in and when to back off. However, you know your own child best... their age and capabilities, and your own sensitivity to your child, can give you some guidance.

The key idea here is that if the child ultimately owns the solution, then they can feel responsible for their improvements and proud of their progress. In a more general way, this helps to counteract any negative ideas they may have about themselves and their abilities to cope with challenges in their life. Help them set short-term, achievable goals. Even small successful steps can bolster their confidence, so notice and praise any attempts they make that move them in the right direction.

### **4. Notice and develop their strengths**

It can also be useful to point out other areas where the child is doing well, or has shown improvement, whatever it might be. For example, if the child can ride a bike, talk about what the learning process was like for them: how it was very difficult at first, that they may have needed someone's help or training wheels, etc. The fact that they didn't give up, and kept trying, indicates that they have persistence, a quality which can also help them overcome their emotional struggles.

When children are in the midst of a problem, it can be hard to believe that it will ever get better, but when they have overcome other challenges, being reminded of their past successes

can help them feel more hopeful about the current situation. It also helps in that they are reminded that their problems are not all they are, and that they have many other wonderful characteristics and abilities.

## **5. Empathize**

Changing anything about ourselves can be difficult, especially anything reflexive or habitual. You might reflect on any time you have tried to change something about yourself to recall how difficult it can be. Telling the child that you know it's hard, and often upsetting, can help them to feel less alone and better understood. It's important to start with such statements. Examples might include "that was really upsetting for you," "that was a tough day," or "you seem pretty discouraged that the plan didn't work so well." This helps cement a positive sense of connection and understanding between the two of you, and creates a basis for then moving forward into problem solving together.

Moving too quickly past the feelings and into advice is a form of minimizing the child's experience. When we don't start with empathy, the child may feel that we don't really understand what they're going through, and therefore they need to show us how upset they are, how big the problem actually is for them, and how futile any effort to plan a coping strategy would be. This isn't a conscious strategy on their part, but rather an intuitive awareness that they need to escalate their message in order to be heard. Remember that all behaviour is, from a certain perspective, an attempt to have our needs met. If your efforts to help devolve into arguments, or you're getting a lot of "buts" in response, back up and re-focus on asking the child to describe the situation and their feelings, and offer empathetic responses.

Along with minimizing, it's also important to avoid what is called pathologizing, which is the tendency to see natural reactions as evidence of a disorder of some kind, and can make the child see themselves as sick, damaged, or deficient in some way. Such beliefs remove them from being in control of their own functioning, and can give the idea that there is nothing they can do about their struggles.

## **6. Deal with the feelings first, then strategies for next time.**

It is very difficult to be reasonable when we are agitated or upset. When our emotions are strongly activated, the emotional centres of our brain and central nervous system kind of take over, and actually block other parts of the brain responsible for higher reasoning. These are our most primitive fight, flight, or freeze responses kicking in. Whatever may have upset us, it is much more difficult for us to then accurately assess our immediate situation and plan a reasonable response.

When your child becomes upset, don't rush to finding solutions to the problem. Focus first on managing the emotions, and helping the child become more calm and composed. Encourage them to experiment and try something they think will help them to feel better. Again,

this could be almost anything. Do they want to go and play with their toys for a while? Do they want to sit on the couch with you and focus on slowing their breathing? Do they want a cookie? Do they want to watch a few funny Youtube videos with you? (I like the baby monkey riding on a pig, but that's just me.) Once the emotions are somewhat more settled, it is then possible for them to think through what happened, hear input from you, and plan a strategy for the next time they are in that situation. This approach helps them come to see that the circumstances they are upset about and their emotional reaction to it are two separate issues, and that by first focusing on managing the emotions, it helps them be better able to manage the situation.

## **7. Feel good about seeking help and support**

We receive many different and often contradictory messages about the best ways to raise our children, some of it valuable, some of it otherwise. I will maintain that raising children is by far the most complicated job most of us ever try to do, which helps explain why there are so many different ideas out there. In truth there really is no *best* way. Our approaches will be shaped by our own experience, our culture and values, and input from others, not to mention the practical realities of the busy lives we lead. It's understandable that we might need some help now and again to sort through the options and reach parenting decisions that feel right for us.

Consulting a children's mental health professional may feel scary, as if you are acknowledging that you are somehow deficient as a parent, or an admission that your child has a "problem." However, most professionals would agree that the earlier effective helping strategies can be implemented with a child, the more likely it is to achieve a positive outcome. The longer troublesome feelings, thoughts, and behaviours go on, the more intractable and habitual they become.

Again, challenge your mindset... seeking help doesn't mean you've failed, it's one of the most loving and respectful things you can do for your child and family. It is merely adding another potential tool to your base, or providing a forum for exploring and looking at things in new ways. Feel good about it!