

How to Help An Anxious Child

Dr. David Russ

I am the father of a child who had panic attacks. I am also a psychologist. Professionally, I know how to treat anxiety but I had to figure out how to do that as a dad. Believe me it is fundamentally different. Forget professional perspective, this is my precious child! I made a lot of mistakes but I learned some things. Finding a way to parent that includes psychological understanding is key. Here are some observations from living with my two perspectives.

All anxiety disorders share the same 3 fundamental components. If you develop parenting strategies that address these three components you will be way ahead and everyone will be less frustrated.

1. Activation. When a child is anxious their nervous system has kicked into a fight or flight response. To put it simply-they are cranked up. Sometimes this is obvious, sometimes less so but trust me they are cranked up. It is a biological fact.

2. Analysis. There is something about the way life and events are being interpreted that is activating or maintaining the fear and worry. Can be hard to nail down but it is there.

3. Action. Anyone who is anxious is either trying to escape or trying to restore control with strategies and rituals. They are trying to get control back.

Here are some strategies based on each of these three components.

1. Activation. Just for a minute turn down the volume so you cannot hear all the reasons for the fear. Just think of the fact that your child's nervous system is cranked up. The throttle is wide open. Lots of things activate this part of the brain, not just this particular fear. Here is a fundamental parenting guideline: Don't throw fuel on the fire! If you get angry, frustrated, anxious, demanding, etc. all those can be distressing to your child so that you inadvertently ramp up the anxiety. Parent toward calming the nervous system when your child is anxious. You can be firm, just be calm. Calm tone, calm voice, calm touch, words of hope and encouragement...calm, calm, calm.

2. Analysis. Anxiety makes things seem dangerous! Dangerous thoughts captivate. Understand that these negative thoughts are surprisingly stubborn. Don't get frustrated or take their resistance personal (see previous point). Attempts to help often bounce off when anyone is cranked up. Fear and worry are fully activated simply by something being possible (it can be very unlikely). Possible is easy to imagine. Fear multiplies possibilities. Overcoming fear requires much more certainty! Problem solving is much more complicated than problem imagining. It will take time. Be patient. Also, anxiety makes you think you cannot deal with it, cannot take it. Anything, whether directly related to the fear or not, that increases their confidence that they can accomplish things and overcome obstacles will help. Build confidence and courage! Anxiety makes you think you are messed up. Not true. It is just anxiety with a stuck throttle. Once the activation is gone the issue is gone. Tell them over and over, it is just anxiety. Don't wander off into elaborate explanations of cause and effect. Simplify, don't multiply.

3. Action. Fear must be faced. It is tempting to avoid it. Don't fall for the temptation. There is no way around this. It is how it is cured. Help your child figure out how to do this. Can be all at once or bits at a time. If it is too much, break it into steps. Anxiety feels like a shattering loss of control. Cannot control thoughts, cannot

control body, cannot control situation. What is this like for a child! If they feel forced into the anxiety provoking situation that will increase the feeling of loss of control. Anything you do to help them choose to face it themselves is far preferred. They must choose to face it ultimately. They will discover they are not afraid of it because choosing puts them back in control. When facing something is unavoidable try increasing the discomfort of not facing it rather than forcing them into it if possible. That still makes it their choice. Note: When anyone first faces fear it can go nuclear. No way around that. Do not let the symptoms freak you out. You have to stick with facing it a while before it starts to lose power.

Dr. David Russ is a licensed psychologist in private practice in North Carolina. He is a co-author of the book, *More Than Me*, published by NavPress. For the last two years, Dr. Russ and Professional Counselor, Chris McCarthy, have been developing a treatment program for anxious kids. In seeking help for his own child, Dr. Russ couldn't find something specifically developed for a child to help them understand what was happening and what to do. The program they created is based upon cognitive-behavioral therapy which has shown conclusive results in the treatment of anxiety. They have added a unique innovation. The science is combined with kid captivating fun and creativity! A group of kids go on a journey meeting all kinds of characters. The way to overcome anxiety is embedded throughout this fun adventure. It is done with professional actors, artwork and production to keep you child engaged and helped. Information is available at www.myanxiouschild.com.