



Anxiety Resources for Children & Adolescents

What to look for to determine if my child is experiencing age appropriate stress or a possible anxiety disorder:

Stress is a natural response to a challenge. Changes in brain chemistry make our heart pump faster and our palms sweat as we get ready to act. Stress can:

- Make us feel nervous, angry, and frustrated.
- Have a positive effect (for example, “pump you up” for performing well).
- Be overwhelming. Feeling stressed every day for a long time can take a toll on your body and mind.

Anxiety is different in that anxiety is a *reaction* to stress such as the feeling that children get when they don't think they can handle the thing (or challenge) that's putting pressure on them. This lack of control makes children feel worried and afraid. Common aspects of anxiety include:

- An anxious feeling is often out of proportion to the real or imagined “threat” (for example, a child crying in terror because she's afraid to enter a birthday party).
- Anxious children may expect that something bad will happen and not believe that they will be able to handle it (for example, that dog is going to bite me and I am going to die).
- “What if?” is a common thought and phrase used.
- Bad feelings associated with anxiety often come from something specific, like math. Anxiety can also be more general in that the uncontrollable “worry” impacts daily life functions such as school, peer relationships, or avoiding activities.

[Stress vs. Anxiety Chart](#)

How can parents help?:

- Be aware of physical symptoms. Oftentimes frequent tummy aches are related to anxiety.
- Be aware of related disabilities. ADHD, Tic Disorders, Learning Disabilities and Depression are also comorbid with Anxiety disorders.
- Do not reinforce avoidance behavior. Provide opportunities to practice and reinforce the use of coping strategies.
- Share your own experiences and successes with managing anxiety.
- Make adjustments in the child's environment: balance activities & schedules, create a predictable environment by preparing for changes in routine (anticipated substitute teacher, overnight field trip, upcoming finals/exams), set timers for time management,

use visuals to keep track of schedules and materials, create opportunities for “down time”, implement scheduled brain breaks, encourage a healthy diet and adequate sleep.

- Be consistent in your responses.
- Create a backup plan.
- Catch your child *not* being anxious: Provide positive reinforcement when they express emotions and utilize de-escalation strategies appropriately.

What to do if your child does not want to talk about it?

- Schedule consistent check in times 2-3 x weekly.
- Encourage your child to journal, draw it out, or talk to a trusted adult.
- Assign the feeling to a number (for example, on a scale of 1-10, how are you feeling)?
- Talk in your child’s “language” (for example, if they label their feeling as a “worry” or “icky feeling in their stomach”, use these words in your conversation).

What to do if you notice a pattern of anxiety related behavior?

- Look for patterns of behavior. (more days than not for at least 6 consecutive months).
[Data Collection Chart](#)
- Reach out to a professional: School Counselor, Therapist.
- Communicate with the school and extracurricular activity providers.
- If the anxiety impacts school performance or the child’s ability to participate in activities consider a psychoeducational evaluation.

What is the most important thing I should say or do?

- Listen!
- Do not make judgements or assumptions.
- Validate your child’s feelings and reinforce that you are there for them.
- Explore how your anxiety may impact your child’s anxiety. “Keep calm and carry on.” Model your own de-escalation strategies.
- Do not be afraid to seek help.
- Try to avoid accidentally “rewarding” your child’s anxiety. For example, allowing your child to miss school, substituting ice cream for going to a friend’s birthday party or giving too much reassurance.

Brain science and anxiety:

Neurologically Speaking. . . Anxiety is one of the body’s oldest coping mechanisms; a way of responding to the feeling of danger, even if it isn’t there. Otherwise known as the fight - or - flight mode that overtakes all of your body’s systems, but is brought on by some specific hormones. Our bodies have an innate stress response designed to protect us from danger so we produce these hormones (cortisol and adrenaline) in response to any perceived emotional or physical threat. So something as serious as a physical attack, or something as physically non threatening as a loud noise or upcoming exam, can switch your body into danger mode. This is why it is important to learn how to “shift” or trick your brain back into a more calm state.

Tips and Tricks:

- **Learn deep breathing techniques:** deep breaths from the diaphragm will help you take in more oxygen, slow your heart rate down and relax your muscles. All of this will physiologically reduce your stress response.
- **Learn to combat negative self talk with positive self talk:** Learning self talk can help remind yourself that you are anxious, that you will be ok, and that the emotions you are feeling are your anxiety and not the situation.
- **Change your physical situation:** when you feel anxious, your brain is responding to different stimuli. Changing your surroundings can help the brain reset itself.
- **Meditate:** the deep breathing from meditation stimulates the vagus nerve which can help stimulate other parts of the nervous system and decrease the physiological effects of anxiety.
- **Reframe your thoughts:** cognitive restructuring is retraining our brain to think in a more productive manner. This involves paying attention to thoughts, recognizing when they are irrational thoughts, challenging them, and learning replacement thoughts and behaviors.
- **Brain breaks:** create a brain break space at school and at home that includes an accessible brain break toolkit. The toolkit may include a visual card that list 3-5 brain break activities to choose from, a journal to write down your “# feeling” before and after the brain break, and sensory regulatory tools such as a squishy ball or theraputty or music.

Additional Resources:

[The Incredible 5 Point Scale](#)

[When My Worries Get Too Big](#)

[White Noise Lite App:](#) For some, white noise can help sleep, increase focus, and reduce stress.

[Brian.FM App:](#) focus, meditation, relaxation.

[Headspace App:](#) guided mindfulness.

[Mind Shift CBT](#)

[Stop, Breathe, and Think](#)

References include: [understood.org](#), [socialthinking.org](#)