



Helping a Child with Stress and Anxiety

Often when we see a child is anxious or stressed, our response is to try and help or solve the problem. Before we take action to help, it is important to ensure we understand what we are dealing with and to ensure the measures we take do not exacerbate the problem. This begins through understanding that the anxiety response is natural and normal.

Therefore, our goal should not be to eliminate anxiety, but to help our children manage it. Learning to cope with stress and anxiety will prepare a child for these feelings when they arise in the future. This is particularly relevant in light of COVID-19 and the continually growing developments.

How a child views anxiety can significantly impact their mental health. If a child judges anxiety as a 'bad' emotion they are more likely to become overwhelmed or stressed by these feelings. This can lead to avoidance and other unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Instead, help children to judge anxiety as 'uncomfortable' but normal. This places them in a better position to observe and accept their feelings and to then take actions to help their situation. This is difficult at first but with practice, support and positive feedback a child can learn to be more comfortable with anxious feelings.

Children also copy how adults deal with their stress and anxiety. Ensure you are open about your feelings and display tolerance and acceptance of your own anxiety while making helpful, positive actions. We cannot control government regulations or the world economy but we can control our attitude and actions, even in times of a crisis.

Supporting and developing children during a crisis is essential to developing their resilience and coping skills for the future. For more strategies to help children with stress and anxiety, contact the EAP line on 1300 878 379

SOME TIPS TO HELP

- Acknowledge and respect your child's feelings. Validate how they feel and communicate that it's okay to be stressed or anxious. Avoid downplaying or belittling their feelings. Then express belief in their abilities and that you will be there to support them through any uncertain or stressful situation.
- Help a child acknowledge and be curious about their thoughts and feelings. Instead of avoiding or hiding from their feelings shine some light on them by discussing how they feel. This can reduce the power of these emotions and make them less stressful. Emotions and feelings are constantly changing so ensure your child always feels safe to communicate how they feel.
- In a notebook create a role model with your child. With their input ask them how a role model or 'hero' would act in this time. Write down a list of everything you can both think of without judgement. Use this exercise to clarify values like courage, kindness, generosity and flexibility. Then discuss situations that have caused anxiety in the past and ask what using these values would look like in that situation. Also look for ways to sprinkle these values throughout their day.
- Once some good 'role model' values are in place use these to guide committed action in the future. Bring your child back to the present as much as possible and ask them what they can do right now to help themselves and others.
- Help your child to create a toolkit of coping strategies. Empower your child to work through their stress and anxiety by teaching them some skills to use when they feel these emotions. Some strategies include: Deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, using a journal to write down feelings, or naming 5 things they can see, hear, smell or touch. These strategies bring them into the present moment and help them to refocus on taking committed action guided by their values.
- Practice re-framing anxious thoughts with your child. Notice and review thoughts that are causing anxiety and question if they are realistic and then ask how they could be reframed to be a more helpful and positive thought.