

Helping Young Children With Everyday Anxiety

Adapted from resources created by Everyday Anxiety Strategies for Early Years (EASEY) at Home.
<https://healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/everyday-anxiety-strategies-early-years-at-home/>

As young children grow and develop, they encounter many new experiences, and they also face many new feelings. Sometimes when they are doing something that is unusual or different, children may feel fear, stress or anxiety.

Families can help their children deal with these feelings by noticing and responding to their needs, and guiding them through safe experiences.

Common signs of anxiety in young children can include:

- ▶ Anger, yelling, or over-reacting to minor upsets or small problems
- ▶ Getting really upset when routines or plans are changed
- ▶ Refusing to participate in something – perhaps saying no, withdrawing, or becoming very quiet
- ▶ Becoming more clingy than usual, or trying to get your attention all the time
- ▶ Talking a lot or asking a lot of questions
- ▶ Expressing worry and talking about what things might go wrong
- ▶ Physical complaints, such as a headache or sore stomach
- ▶ Changes in eating habits or difficulty sleeping

This might sound like:

- ☐ “I don’t want to Please don’t make me ...”
- ☐ “I feel sick. I want to go home.”
- ☐ “Can’t I stay with you instead?”
- ☐ “But what if ? What would I do?”

- ▶ Anxiety can come and go, and it is normal for young children to feel anxious or worried sometimes.
- ▶ However, if your child shows several signs of anxiety that interfere with their daily life and last for a long time, it may be helpful to look for some extra support.

The following tips may also be useful for helping young children avoid or deal with mild to moderate levels of anxiety and stress.

- ▶ **Play and time outside can create a sense of calm for children (and adults, too).**
 - Playing helps improve our mood, and can allow children to explore new things in safe ways.
 - Playing outside especially relieves stress. Using our senses to smell, touch, taste and listen in nature helps us be mindful. Parents can encourage children to take a deep breath and notice what they see, hear, and smell.
 - Taking small risks, like climbing over a log, rolling down a small hill, or sledding in the winter, can build self-confidence for young children.
 - Connections to the land build children's resilience, healing, and overall mental well-being. Families help relieve anxiety just by being together on the land, talking about the plants, animals, birds, and the natural setting.
- ▶ **Responses from adults can help calm feelings of anxiety. Sometimes young children show their anxiety by behaving in negative ways. Rather than getting upset, adults can try to pause, take a deep breath, and react in a supportive way.**
 - Use warm and confident phrases, such as "I'm right here. You're safe." Or "We all feel scared or nervous sometimes. But we can handle this." Or "I remember when you felt nervous doing ..., but then you faced it, and things went well." Or "Let's take some deep breathes and watch for a bit. Then maybe you'll feel ready to ..."
 - If a child doesn't respond well to verbal encouragement, singing, slow breathing, or distraction might be soothing.
 - Parents can help their young children gradually face scary situations, so their confidence grows as they see that they can try new things without negative results.
- ▶ **Try to establish a comforting home environment.**
 - When possible, try to avoid rushing from one activity to the next. Schedule some down time. A major cause of stress for everyone is having too much to do. Set priorities and do things that are the most important and give you more happiness.
 - Family routines can help create a sense of security. When you can, follow a calming bedtime routine, eat meals together without electronic devices, and – if possible – let your children know ahead if routines and plans will change, so they aren't surprised or disappointed at the last minute.

- Try to balance your family life, fitting in time for work, rest, and play. And make time for fun social activities with friends and family.
- Use physical activity as a mood booster for the whole family. Family walks, time in a garden, sports or games, etc. reduce stress.
- Look after your own well-being by giving yourself permission to relax. As a family, try to eat healthy foods and get plenty of sleep.
- Be aware of your family's use of media and what content your children are seeing and hearing. Is it age-appropriate? Would it be disturbing for young children?

► **Try some creative activities to help children feel more calm.**

- Have your child draw a picture of something they find comforting, like a pet, a family member, a place they like ... and hang it on the fridge. Tell your child it is always there if they need to look at it.
- Trace your child's hand, and in each finger write something they are good at or a strength they have. It might be "kind," "fast runner," "good drummer" Hang it up to remind your child that they are capable and strong.
- Make a comfort box. Put some special items in a box your child can use when they need something soothing, such as a favourite calming book, a stuffed toy, a small blanket, or maybe some play-dough. Some children find it calming to work with dough. Some children also find it calming to look at a snow globe, or a small plastic bottle filled with some warm water and some glitter glue, which can have the same effect of gentle movement.
- Draw pictures or use craft materials (such as paper bags, empty paper towel rolls, small tubs ...) to create monsters, and make them silly – such as adding clown noses, crazy glasses or hats, funny hair, googly eyes, etc. Talk to your child about how they can use their imagination to make things seem less frightening, such as spiders wearing clown shoes, tripping over their eight big feet.
- Use simple props to help your child practice ways to ease their worries. For example, give them a cape to practice having superpowers to fight their fears. Or make a pretend wand so they can make something scary disappear from their mind. Or give them special glasses that can help them see the good parts of something that makes them nervous, like the fun they will have if you leave them in pre-school where they can play with the other children.
- Play calming music and let your child colour or do some other quiet activity. Ask your child to think about how the music makes them feel. Could they think about this feeling when something makes them worried?

The good news is that little brains are constantly learning and growing, and with more experience and understanding they will become better able to cope with new things. Until then, your support can help them explore and enjoy the world around them with more security and confidence.