



Parent  Connect

Children and Anxiety: Considerations for Mindful Parenting

Q & A



*The following questions were submitted at the parent program on October 3.
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Is there any help at school or through District 34 for kids with anxiety?

District 34 recognizes the importance of helping students with anxiety. Every school has a school psychologist and a school social worker as well as the ability to put in supports and services as needed for a child. If a parent has concerns they should contact the student service administrator or the principal at their child's school.

Can you touch base a bit on obsessive compulsive disorder? I have an 11-year-old child who is exhibiting some OCD tendencies and am wondering when to seek professional help of possibly ways to help him with this.

The guidepost that we use when considering whether to access professional assistance is the degree to which symptoms and behaviors are getting in the way of functioning and/or are causing distress to the person who is experiencing them. If you have concerns that his tendencies are interfering with him doing the things that he enjoys, or are limiting the things that he will try, or are distressing to him, we would encourage you to consider reaching out for professional assistance. You can always make that call and request an assessment and professional opinion about whether further intervention is recommended.

Does too much attention to anxiety amplify anxiety?

It depends. As we discussed during the presentation, if an anxious child tends to hyperfocus on thoughts or worries that are not helpful, and actually perpetuate the cycle of anxiety, this can amplify the anxious response. However, as a parent, your involvement has the potential to assist your child in managing their anxiety if you are able to be present and well-regulated yourself. If you are anxious about your child's anxiety and have a difficult time managing your own anxiety, your involvement could amplify their anxiety.

What do you tell your child after they overcome something they were anxious about if they say, “until next time.” They are already thinking about the next time instead of feeling happy about what they just succeeded doing.

Overall, we would encourage you to validate your child’s emotional experience (e.g., it sounds like you are already worried about doing this again, that must be a bummer for you). Further, at a non-emotionally charged time, we would encourage you to, talk to your child about anxiety, how everyone experiences it, and how it can be helpful at times. Explaining the Cognitive Triangle (i.e., how thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all related and influence each other), and helping them to consider and use alternative thoughts (e.g., true, more helpful thoughts, mindfulness principles) can be very helpful too. We would encourage you to consider helping your child learn skills to manage their anxiety (e.g., box breathing, etc.) and to plan to use those skills when known anxiety provoking situations are anticipated. You can remind them to use their “beginner’s mind” to allow that we don’t know the future—they probably didn’t think they could do it when they overcame the anxiety, but they did, it’s not necessary to predict a negative future. Lastly, we would also encourage you to continue to celebrate the times that your child faces his/her anxiety and is able to tolerate it.

How do you target the physiology when the anxiety response is anger?

Much like anxiety, working to manage the emotional response before it crosses the “flip your lid” threshold is ideal. To that end, it is very important to be aware of the environmental influences that increase the emotional response and to address that emotional response as soon as you have awareness that it is increasing. Once the “lid has flipped” and access to the prefrontal cortex is diminished, the same strategies that would be applied to anxiety, would also be applicable here; however, we would also encourage you to consider safe and adaptive ways of “getting the anger out.” For example, physical exercise might be useful (e.g., take a run around the block, shoot hoops, do jumping jacks, etc.).

What tips can you give a parent to use when their child will not engage in role play or discuss thoughts or feelings?

This is not uncommon. Many children are reluctant to talk with their parents about their thoughts and feelings, and are reluctant to role play strategies with them. It is important to communicate to your child that you love them and are available to talk with them about their feelings and experiences if they ever want to do this. Some children have times in the day or week during which time they are more likely to communicate about “real” feelings and experiences (e.g., bedtime, long car rides, etc.). Identifying when these times are and trying to maximize opportunities during these times will be important.

How do we deal with kids who have ADHD and anxiety disorders?

This is a really broad question, and one we don’t think we can do justice by answering here. However, the strategies of targeting the downstairs brain, exploring the cognitive triangle, and validating feelings all work well for kids with ADHD. They may require more practice and encouragement to learn the habits themselves, but the strategies are applicable. If you

would like more support for your child who has ADHD and has anxiety disorders, we would encourage you to reach out to a professional to explore optimal ways to help your child.

I have a high schooler who can only start studying at the last minute, only when under stress. He stays up all night to finish his work or study for a test because he started so late. How can we change that habit?

You are not alone. Many parents express concerns about this kind of behavior. Even though many people function well under this kind of deadline and last-minute planning, there are some significant ways in which this can be maladaptive and interfere with optimal functioning in the longer term (e.g., interferes with sleep, some projects literally can't be done in one night, it makes it difficult to work on group projects, etc.). Without knowing your child, and what you have tried to do to support him, we would start at the beginning and wonder if this pattern of behavior is about anxiety or a reflection of something else (ADHD, challenges with motivation, poor time management skills, etc.). As we discussed in the presentation, when anxiety is a driving factor, avoidance and procrastination are often behavioral outcomes, which interfere with getting work done. We would encourage you to explore whether your child feels stuck and has a hard time knowing how to begin the studying and the work, and/or feels anxious about not doing it well enough. We would also encourage you to explore practical time management and planning strategies with your child.

At what point do you inform/seek help from the child's teacher, versus allowing them the time and space to handle a worry or issue at school independently (especially if they ask you not to involve the teachers)?

This is a very common question as well, you are not alone. We would encourage you to consider what you can do to support your child to prepare to manage this issue when in school. Are there calming strategies that you can work on together? Are there situations that you can role play with each other? Does your child understand that the anxiety will pass? Supported practice at home can make a big difference for in school experiences for your child. Further, we would encourage you to consider the degree to which your child's worry/issue is interfering with their performance, their openness to engage in activities, and in their overall discomfort. If this becomes a prolonged issue that interferes with them trying new things, performing to the best of their ability (whatever that may be), they are uncomfortable, AND the supportive preparation work that you are doing with them is not effective, it might make sense to reach out to their teacher.

Do you have any recommended books for adults and/or children?

Here's a short list of helpful books for parents:

- The Whole Brain Child by Daniel Siegel, MD and Tina Payne Bryson, PhD
- How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- How Children Thrive by Mark Bertin, MD
- FISH! A Proven Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results by Stephan C. Lundin, PhD, Harry Paul, and John Christensen

Helpful books for teens:

- The Mindful Teen Powerful Skills to Help You Handle Stress One Moment at a Time by Dzung Vo, MD
- Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life for Teens by Joseph V. Ciarrochi, PhD, Louise Hayes, PhD, and Ann Bailey, MA

Helpful books for tweens:

- Dodging Drama in a World Gone Mad by John Dominguez, PhD
- American Girl series A Smart Girl's Guide
 - Worry
 - Friendship Troubles
 - Knowing What to Say

Helpful books for kids:

- Wemberly Worried by Kevin Henkes
- The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn