Making friends with Anxiety:
Understanding the Protector Within

What if anxiety isn't the enemy?

Most parents of children experiencing anxiety want to make the feeling go away as quickly as possible. We reassure. We let them skip the difficult thing. We say "you'll be fine" and hope the feeling passes worried bringing attention to it could make it worse.

Here is what I know from working with children and families: when we spend all our energy fighting anxiety, it tends to get **louder**. Your child's nervous system reads that struggle as more evidence that something dangerous must be happening.

Anxiety is trying to protect your child

Anxiety is the brain's alarm system, constantly scanning for danger and working hard to keep your child safe. The problem is not the alarm itself. Sometimes it becomes a little too sensitive, going off for burnt toast rather than a real fire.

When you help your child understand this, anxiety stops being a terrifying mystery and becomes something they can look at with curiosity. Not an enemy to defeat. A messenger carrying something important.

Separating the feeling from who your child is

When we say "they are an anxious child," anxiety becomes their identity. When we say "anxious feelings are showing up right now," the feeling becomes something that visits, not something they are. Your child can look at it, name it, and decide what to do next. They remain in the driving seat.

Sometimes it can help to take this one step further by giving the feeling a name. When anxiety becomes “Bob” or “the worry voice,” it becomes something your child can notice, talk to, and respond to rather than something that takes over.

Think of anxiety like a worried passenger in the car, not the driver. It will point out every possible hazard on the road. It does not get to decide where your child is going.

Scripts to try

When anxiety shows up:

- “Let’s give this worry a name. What should we call it?”
- “I can see anxiety is showing up right now and it feels hard”.
- *"That anxious feeling is allowed to be here."*

To notice anxiety without letting it take over:

- *"Hello anxiety, what are you trying to protect me from?"*
- *"Thank you for trying to help. I've got this."*
- *"You can come along in the passenger seat. But you don't get to drive."*

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Key Ideas

Connection Before Courage. Before any of the tools above, connect. "I see how hard this feels." When your child does not feel seen, they will not feel safe enough to take the risk.

The Thankful Pause. When anxiety arrives, encourage your child to pause and say: "Thank you for trying to protect me. What are you worried might happen?" This turns anxiety from a threat into information.

Be the Worry's Lawyer. Rather than arguing against the anxious thought, help your child hear its side. Ask: "What is it most scared of? What is it trying to protect you from?" Often children discover the worry is trying to keep them safe from getting hurt, failing, or feeling embarrassed. When they understand what it is trying to do, it stops feeling so overwhelming and becomes something they can look at with curiosity rather than something overwhelming.

The Small Step Plan. When your child is saying "I can't do the whole thing," agree with them. Identify the smallest possible first step together. Move into action quickly, as long discussions give anxiety more time to build.

Modelling Out Loud. Children learn not from whether we experience anxious feelings, but from how we handle them. Saying "I'm feeling a bit nervous about this. I'm going to take a few slow breaths" teaches your child that feelings are survivable and we can move forward alongside them.

Reassurance and avoidance feel kind in the moment but keeps anxiety going over time. Over time, it teaches your child that they need someone else's certainty to manage anxious feelings. Allowing avoidance confirms the brain's false alarm that the situation really was too dangerous to face. Waiting to feel “calm” before acting is one of the most common traps families fall into. Confidence does not come before action. It comes through action.

A note to hold onto

Anxiety is not a character flaw in your child. It is not defiance. It is a messenger, and it will keep knocking until someone listens.

Children who learn to move forward with anxiety alongside them, without waiting to feel brave, build something that lasts. Not just freedom from anxiety in one situation. Genuine confidence in their own ability to handle whatever comes next.

This is general guidance and not tailored to your child. Every child is different, and what works for one may not work for another. If you are concerned about your child’s mental health, please seek support from a qualified professional.



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