

Understanding anxiety in your child.

Anxiety, fear and worry are normal emotions that every child experiences. Some children experience anxiety more often and more intensely than others. Here are some principles that can be helpful for parents to prevent and manage anxiety, so that it doesn't impact on their life.

1. Love and security: Providing a loving and safe environment is fundamental for your child's mental health.
2. Healthy lifestyle: Other fundamentals such as regular bedtimes, adequate sleep, healthy eating, daily activity and limited screen time are also critical to help children regulate their emotions.
3. Gradually face fears: Staying away from scary or challenging situations in the short term may reduce the child's distress but in the long term it makes it worse. Using a stepladder approach to gradual and gently encourage your child to face situations they find challenging, will help them to learn that the situation is not as scary as they think and they can handle it. Encourage your child to practice bravery and practice often, gently pushing them outside their comfort zone, in a loving and supportive way.
4. Pay attention to courageous behavior: Use praise and rewards to focus on the times your child faces their fears "I really liked the way you...(said hello to the teacher)" Acknowledge your child's fears and worries, don't dismiss them but pay attention to when they are being brave and courageous, regardless of how small it may be.
5. Avoid jumping in too soon: Although it is often easier, try and step back and let the child handle the situation on their own. This is often hard to tolerate their distress, but you want to send the message that you are confident in their ability to handle the difficult situation.
6. Encourage realistic thinking: Children who have high anxiety, are often on the lookout for bad things to happen or expect the worst in a situation. Encourage your child to think realistically, like a detective. *What are the facts? What happened last time? What do you think is most likely to happen?*

7. Take risks and make mistakes: Some children with anxiety avoid taking risks like not putting their hand up in class in case they get it wrong, saying no to an invitation to somewhere new, or spending too long on their work to make it perfect). Using a step ladder approach, encourage your child to make mistakes and do things out of their comfort zone.
8. Be a coping role model. Our children learn by watching how we manage stress and how we handle challenging situations. By modelling calm and courageous behaviour, your child can learn to manage their own fear and worry in a healthy way.

If you feel anxiety is impacting on your child's life (e.g., stopping them from getting the most out of life) there are a number of programs that can teach them strategies to manage their anxiety. Speak to the school counsellor, GP or there are a number of resources available at Macquarie University including online programs (www.mq.edu.au/CEH-clinic)

More information:

raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/health-daily-care/mental-health/anxiety-in-children

TEDx talk: Raising emotionally health children <https://youtu.be/hmJDHdicMiY>