

— Anxiety —

It is normal to feel fearful, worried, or anxious. A person may feel anxious before taking an exam or walking down a dark sidewalk, which is normal and useful. Normal, useful anxiety helps people feel more alert or careful. The worry or anxiety typically lessens or goes away once the person is out of the situation that caused the anxiety. However, for some children and adolescents the worry does not go away and it gets worse over time. When anxiety becomes hard to control, fears become extreme, worries are present on most days, and your child starts to avoid scary situations or doing normal things, it may be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

You will know that it is time to talk with your child's doctor if your child's fears:

- ▶ Seem extreme or last past the normal age
- ▶ Cause your child to be very upset or have tantrums
- ▶ Keep your child from doing things - like going to school, sleeping alone, or being apart from you
- ▶ Cause physical symptoms (like stomach aches, headaches, or racing heart) or your child feels breathless, sick, or dizzy

What can parents do at home to help?

- ▶ Talk to your child about their fears and worries, let them know it is okay to feel anxiety and that you are available to listen.
- ▶ Provide comfort and reassurance, being kind and reminding your child that they are safe.
- ▶ Encourage your child to face their fears in a safe and comfortable way. Do not allow your child to avoid situations that are scary and cause anxiety, this teaches them that their fears are realistic and worth avoiding
- ▶ Be a positive role model, show your child that fears and worries can be managed in healthy ways





Helping Kids Handle Worry

Kids don't have to pay bills, cook dinners, or manage carpools. But — just like adults — they have their share of daily demands and things that don't go smoothly. If frustrations and disappointments pile up, kids can get stressed or worried.

It's natural for all kids to worry at times, and because of personality and temperament differences, some may worry more than others. Luckily, parents can help kids learn to manage stress and tackle everyday problems with ease. Kids who can do that develop a sense of confidence and optimism that will help them master life's challenges, big and small.

What Do Kids Worry About?

What kids worry about is often related to the age and stage they're in.

Kids and preteens typically worry about things like grades, tests, their changing bodies, fitting in with friends, that goal they missed at the soccer game, or whether they'll make the team. They may feel stressed over social troubles like cliques, peer pressure, or whether they'll be bullied, teased, or left out.

Because they're beginning to feel more a part of the larger world around them, preteens also may worry about world events or issues they hear about on the news or at school. Things like terrorism, war, pollution, global warming, endangered animals, and natural disasters can become a source of worry.

Helping Kids Conquer Worry

To help your kids manage what's worrying them:

Find out what's on their minds: Be available and take an interest in what's happening at school, on the team, and with your kids' friends. Take casual opportunities to ask how it's going. As you listen to stories of the day's events, be sure to ask about what your kids think and feel about what happened.

If your child seems to be worried about something, ask about it. Encourage kids to put what's bothering them into words. Ask for key details and listen. Sometimes just sharing the story with you can help lighten their load.

Show you care and understand. Being interested in your child's concerns shows they're important to you, too, and helps kids feel supported and understood. Reassuring comments can help — but usually only after you've heard your child out. Say that you understand your child's feelings and the problem.

Guide kids to solutions. You can help reduce worries by helping kids learn to deal with challenging situations. When your child tells you about a problem, offer to help come up with a solution together. If your son is worried about an upcoming math test, for example, offering to help him study will lessen his concern about it.

In most situations, resist the urge to jump in and fix a problem for your child — instead, think it through and come up with possible solutions together. Problem-solve *with* kids, rather than *for* them. By taking an active role, kids learn how to tackle a problem on their own.

Keep things in perspective. Without minimizing a child's feelings, point out that many problems are temporary and solvable, and that there will be better days and other opportunities to try again. Teaching kids to keep problems in perspective can lessen their worry and help build strength, resilience, and the optimism to try again. Remind your kids that whatever happens, things will be OK.

So, for example, if your son is worried about whether he'll get the lead in the school play, remind him that there's a play every season — if he doesn't get the part he wants this time, he'll have other opportunities. Acknowledge how important this is to him and let him know that regardless of the outcome, you're proud that he tried out and gave it

his best shot.

Make a difference. Sometimes kids worry about big stuff — like terrorism, war, or global warming — that they hear about at school or on the news. Parents can help by discussing these issues, offering accurate information, and correcting any misconceptions kids might have. Try to reassure kids by talking about what adults are doing to tackle the problem to keep them safe.

Be aware that your own reaction to global events affects kids, too. If you express anger and stress about a world event that's beyond your control, kids are likely to react that way too. But if you express your concern by taking a proactive approach to make a positive difference, your kids will feel more optimistic and empowered to do the same.

So look for things you can do with your kids to help everyone feel like you're making a positive difference. You can't stop a war, for example, but your family can contribute to an organization that works for peace or helps kids in war-torn countries. Or your family might perform community service to give your kids the experience of volunteering.

Offer reassurance and comfort. Sometimes when kids are worried, what they need most is a parent's reassurance and comfort. It might come in the form of a hug, some heartfelt words, or time spent together. It helps kids to know that, whatever happens, parents will be there with love and support.

Sometimes kids need parents to show them how to let go of worry rather than dwell on it. Know when it's time to move on, and help kids shift gears. Lead the way by introducing a topic that's more upbeat or an activity that will create a lighter mood.

Highlight the positive. Ask your kids what they enjoyed about their day, and listen when they tell you about what goes great for them or what they had fun doing. Give plenty of airtime to the good things that happen. Let them tell you what they think and feel about their successes, achievements, and positive experiences — and what they did to help things turn out so well.

Schedules are busy, but make sure there's time for your kids to do little things they feel good doing. Daily doses of positive emotions and experiences — like enjoyment, gratitude, love, amusement, relaxation, fun, and interest — offset stress and help kids do well.

Be a good role model. The most powerful lessons we teach kids are the ones we demonstrate. Your response to your own worries, stress, and frustrations can go a long way toward teaching your kids how to deal with everyday challenges. If you're rattled or angry when dealing with a to-do list that's too long, your kids will learn that as the appropriate response to stress.

Instead, look on the bright side and voice optimistic thoughts about your own situations at least as often as you talk about what bothers or upsets you. Set a good example with your reactions to problems and setbacks. Responding with optimism and confidence teaches kids that problems are temporary and tomorrow's another day. Bouncing back with a can-do attitude will help your kids do the same.

Reviewed by: Mary L. Gavin, MD

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Normal Childhood Fears

Is it Normal for Kids to Have Fears?

It's normal for children to feel afraid at times. Fear is an emotion that can help kids be cautious. Things that are new, big, loud, or different can seem scary at first. Parents can help kids feel safe and learn to feel at ease.

What Do Kids Feel Afraid of?

What kids feel afraid of changes as they grow. Some fears are common and normal at certain ages.

For example:

Infants feel stranger anxiety. When babies are about 8–9 months old, they can recognize the faces of people they know. That's why new faces can seem scary to them — even a new babysitter or relative. They may cry or cling to a parent to feel safe.

Toddlers feel separation anxiety. At some time between 10 months and 2 years, many toddlers start to fear being apart from a parent. They don't want a parent to leave them at daycare, or at bedtime. They may cry, cling, and try to stay near their parent.

Young kids fear "pretend" things. Kids ages 4 through 6 can imagine and pretend. But they can't always tell what's real and what's not. To them, the scary monsters they imagine seem real. They fear what might be under their bed or in the closet. Many are afraid of the dark and at bedtime. Some are afraid of scary dreams. Young kids may also be afraid of loud noises, like thunder or fireworks.

Older kids fear real-life dangers. When kids are 7 or older, monsters under the bed can't scare them (much) because they know they're not real. At this age, some kids begin to fear things that could happen in real life. They may have a fear that a "bad guy" is in the house. They may feel afraid about natural disasters they hear about. They may fear getting hurt or that a loved one could die. Schoolage kids may also feel anxious about schoolwork, grades, or fitting in with friends.

Preteens and teens may have social fears. They might feel anxious about how they look or whether they will fit in. They may feel anxious or afraid before they give a report in class, start a new school, take a big exam, or play in a big game.

How Can I Help When My Child Is Afraid?

When your child is afraid, you can help by doing these things:

- Comfort your infant, toddler, or very young child by saying, "It's OK, you're safe, I'm here." Let your child know you're there to protect them. Give hugs and soothing words to help your child feel safe.
- As your child grows, talk and listen. Be calm and soothing. Help your child put feelings into words. Help kids try new things.
- Help your baby get used to a new person while you hold him and let him feel safe. Soon, the new person won't seem like a stranger anymore.
- Let your toddler be apart from you for short times at first. When you need to part from your child, say you'll be back, give a hug and a smile, and go. Let your child learn that you always come back.
- For your young child who's afraid of the dark, have a soothing bedtime routine. Read or sing to your child. Let your child feel safe and loved.
- Help your child slowly face fears. For example, check together for under-bed monsters. With you there to support her, let your child see for herself there's nothing to fear. Help her feel her courage.

- Limit the scary images, movies, or shows kids see. These can cause fears.
- Help kids and teens learn to prepare for challenges, like tests or class reports. Let them know you believe in them.

Is My Child's Fear Normal, or Do We Need More Help?

Most kids cope with normal fears with gentle support from their parent. As they grow, they get over fears they had at a younger age.

Some kids have a harder time, and need more help with fears. If fears are extreme or keep a child from doing normal things, it might be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

Talk to your doctor if your child's fears:

- seem extreme or last past the normal age
- cause your child to be very upset or have tantrums
- keep your child from doing things — like going to school, sleeping alone, or being apart from you
- cause physical symptoms (like stomachaches, headaches, or a racing heart) or your child feels breathless, dizzy, or sick

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The **BIG** COPING SKILLS LIST

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Use positive self-talk | Eat a healthy meal | Host a dinner party |
| Do deep breathing | Watch your favorite TV show | Do your homework |
| Watch your favorite movie | Do a word search | Think of your strengths |
| Take a shower | Write a short story | Talk in a funny voice |
| Go for a walk | Play your favorite sport | Volunteer your time |
| Talk to a counselor | Take a nap if you need it | Have a picnic |
| Laugh | Do a crossword puzzle | Rearrange your room |
| Paint or draw | Play a game outside | Call a relative |
| Exercise | Cook or bake with a parent | Meet someone new |
| Play with your pet | Ask for a hug | Create an action plan |
| Go for a jog | Set a goal | Draw a comic |
| Talk to a friend | Think of your favorite memory | Talk to your pet |
| Play a video game | Dance | Read a positive quote |
| Hang out with friends | Go for a bike ride | Write your feelings in a journal |
| Listen to your favorite song | Go to the park | Pick out an outfit for tomorrow |
| Take a time out | Stretch or do yoga | Try to make your sibling laugh |
| Think of something funny | Clean your room | Try to make your parents laugh |
| Play with your favorite toy | Do something kind | Walk the dog |
| Use an I-Feel message | Smile until you feel better | Create jewelry |
| Count to 10 | Think of the consequences | Write your own song |
| Spend time with family | Learn a new skill | Play a board or card game |
| Go for a hike | Listen to calming music | Play on your phone |
| Flip through a magazine | | Answer a "Would You Rather" question |
| Visit somewhere new | | Sing |
| Face your problem | | Read this whole list! |

