

Anxiety in Children and Teens: General Guidelines for Parents

How are fear and anxiety different from each other?

Fear is an emotional response to a real or imagined **immediate** threat. Children may be afraid of things like strangers, separation from parents, or specific situations (such as the dark or thunderstorms).

Anxiety is the anticipation of a **future** threat. Older children and teens may be anxious in social situations or worry about grades or athletic performance, among other things.

How do I know if my child has an anxiety disorder?

It is normal to worry sometimes. Many children and teens carry on despite their worries. **Your child may have an anxiety disorder if their worries are seriously distressing or cause problems for their everyday functioning.**

Anxiety disorders are characterized by worries that are:

- Persistent
- Excessive
- Unreasonable
- Irrational

What can I do to help with my child with their anxiety?

Because anxiety is irrational, it is difficult to talk someone out of it or to explain it away. Spending too much time rationalizing or processing worries can lead to them worsening over time. Treatment for anxiety includes a skill-building approach, with homework between appointments and a lot of parental involvement. The main treatments include:

1. **Setting aside “worry time.”**

Some children want to talk about their worries several times per day. You may have found that you can help your child overcome their worries in the short term, but in the long run, your child continues to be anxious and seeks reassurance from you. Over time, talking about worries can start to interfere with learning opportunities, social engagement, and the activities of daily life. “Worry time” involves ending the cycle of the intrusive worries by limiting your response to it in the moment. Instead, worries can be discussed during a planned time each day. This way, you can still be a responsive and nurturing parent without causing your child’s worries to disrupt their daily activities. This can be especially helpful for young children. See our “Acknowledge and Defer” parent handout for more information: <https://michmed.org/YDyWb>.

2. **Practicing relaxation.**

Children with anxiety may experience body symptoms like stomach discomfort, sweating, headaches, and muscle tension. This is our body’s natural response to stress. With practice, your child can learn to reduce these unpleasant physical symptoms. Relaxation strategies that help reduce physical symptoms include:

- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Guided imagery

Relaxation can be especially helpful for children ages 10 and older, but it may not always be enough to defeat their anxiety. Relaxation skills can be taught during appointments and practiced at home with help from instructional websites (<https://cmhc.utexas.edu/mindbodylab.html>) and/or phone apps (BellyBio, Breathe2Relax).

3. Practicing exposure.

The best way to defeat your child’s anxiety is by facing it directly. This is called **exposure**. Mental health professionals can help you and your child create an “anxiety hierarchy” that allows children and teens to face their fears gradually over time. Your child starts by facing a fear that is a little bit scary and earning bravery rewards. With continued practice, they work their way up to the scariest situation. This process may take several weeks to complete, and your provider will help you decide how to move through the hierarchy. This is especially helpful for teens, and it can be adapted for young children. See our “Exposure” handout for additional details: <https://michmed.org/8RYxk>.

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