

An advice sheet for parents and carers of children with selective mutism

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH ANXIETY

How to make anxious children MORE anxious...

1. Tell them there's nothing to worry about
2. Sort out their problems
3. Do not allow them to become distressed
4. Comfort them
5. Let them decide what they can cope with
6. Ask if they are going to be OK
7. Answer all their questions
8. Spring that dreaded event at the last hour so there's less time to worry

Did that list surprise you? No-one wants to see their child in distress. So of course you want to take away your child's anxiety...

However, anxiety is NORMAL and it is GOOD for us; it keeps us safe!

Anxiety makes sure we are on the look out for danger and prepared to meet life's challenges. When children are shown that the only way to cope with anxiety is to eliminate it, they become more and more intolerant of anxiety. They only have to feel the tiniest bit anxious and it's unbearable – they feel compelled to run (FLIGHT) or resist (FIGHT) and may seize up or go into denial (FREEZE).

There is another way. Parents can help children FACE their anxiety, understand it, work with it and overcome it!

Doing things differently to make anxious children LESS anxious...

1. Anxious children can't help worrying. Telling them there's nothing to worry about makes the worry more confusing, elusive and overwhelming. Children need help to understand that it is *worry* (a product of their excellent imagination!) that is making their body produce the sensations of panic, rather

than the situation they fear; “You feel worried because you’ve never done this on your own before, you’re not sure what will happen when I go downstairs. It feels scary right now but after a while you’ll see that nothing bad happens, and your worry will go away and stop bothering you”. By labelling and recognising Worry, children learn that it’s a normal response that they can talk to and control; it’s not a stop sign that has to be obeyed. So rather than dismissing worries, let children know how amazing they are every time Worry appears and they are brave enough to ride it out. They’ll be surprised how quickly it gives up and goes away!



2. When children are tiny, of course they need their carers to fix any problems so that they are safe, well and happy. But even two year olds are actively problem-solving throughout the day as they discover how to avoid food falling off their spoon and retrieve objects that are out of reach. Independence develops through experimenting, finding your own solutions and enjoying the knowledge that you can be self-reliant. It thrives on a flexible approach to life where there are many ways to do the same thing; no need to be perfect; and pride in *effort* as well as achievement. When parents do all the fixing for anxious children by providing comfort, removing sources of stress or doing things for them to prevent failure, the children become more dependent, less willing to take risks and increasingly passive in their parent’s presence. Just recognising that you have fallen into any of these patterns of behaviour and knowing that it was in response to your child’s anxiety, not the cause of it, is the most important step towards turning things around.
3. If we allow children to avoid everything they’re afraid of, they will never learn the difference between a *real* threat and an imagined threat. Acknowledge how

brave children are being and help them face that fear one tiny step at a time. Maybe they only need to attend the party for the first ten minutes or watch you having your dental examination, but NOT going to the party or to the dentist's should never be an option.



4. We comfort young children when they are in pain and convey the message: 'Stinging nettles, broken glass and fights are BAD things that you need to avoid if you want to save yourself further pain; but meanwhile, I will make you feel better'. If we cuddle and soothe children when they are afraid of insects, dogs or fireworks for example, the message is the same: 'These are BAD things to be avoided and you should run to me for comfort'. So, **ACKNOWLEDGE** their anxiety; **REASSURE**; **FACE** the fear and **PRAISE** them. "Of course you're worried, you weren't expecting that but it can't hurt you. Let's stand further back until you get used to it". Save the cuddles for when you congratulate them for being so brave!
5. Anxious children will be convinced they cannot face certain events. By agreeing to their terms – no parties, no visits, no falling asleep alone in their own bed - we deprive them of the opportunity to discover that anxiety can be managed and things are not as difficult as they expect. Consequently, all new challenges will be scary and they will make increasing demands to avoid any anxiety-provoking situation. It is frightening for children to have this much control; they need *adults* to make the big decisions about what is a real threat and what is safe. Adults should in turn be guided by the child regarding how *much* they can face at a time, steering them towards gradual mastery of feared situations. By making activities simpler or shorter, providing a distraction or

phasing out support, realistic expectations can be set and children can be assured that all they need is the courage to have a go. It may also take courage for their parent to step back and let it happen...

6. "Will you be OK now?" Asking children this question before leaving them tells the child they are right to worry – after all, even you, the adult, are not sure that they'll be OK! *Tell* children they will be OK, let them know when you will be back, and do your very best not to be late. When you return, stay a while to share an activity and on your way home, talk about the fun you had, rather than the terrible time they had without you.

7. Anxious children try to eliminate uncertainty by asking their parents endless questions about upcoming events. Answering each one conveys the message that the only way to deal with anxiety is to have a completely accurate forecast for the future – an impossible task. Having *no*



idea of what's coming up is horribly unsettling at best and utterly terrifying at worst. So children certainly need a broad outline of their daily schedule and important events in their calendar. They need explanations or role-play of routine procedures to know what to expect. But beyond that, as long as children have a clear understanding of what is required from them to complete specific assignments, they need to discover that the finer detail can wait, and more importantly, that they can cope with *not knowing*. Differentiate between need-to-know questions that require an answer and 'worry' questions. Try to answer 'worry' questions with another question so children can explore the reasons for their anxiety and test out how they would cope in each situation. "I'm not sure how many people will be there, why would you like to know? How

many do you think you could cope with? So what could you do if there were more than that? What would make it easier?"; "She might have a dog. What worries you most about dogs? How can we tell if it's safe to go near a dog? What do you think dogs want when they jump up? What would make you feel better if a dog was around? So what should we ask Auntie Sue to do?"

Above all, show children by your own example that it's natural to worry about new situations but you can be brave and give it a go anyway. You can show Worry who's in charge!

8. After seeing anxiety, repetitive questioning and resistance grow on the approach to dreaded events, it is completely understandable to forgo advance warning to save children getting themselves into a state. On the surface this seems to be a good strategy, for children often appear to cope reasonably well when there is no way out of a situation. However, this 'success' is usually a feat of endurance spurred on by sheer adrenaline, rather than an enjoyable experience. The child is left, not with a sense of achievement, but with feelings of resentment, dread and insecurity. They become increasingly wary and suspicious, knowing that the next surprise could be just round the corner. Working through anticipatory anxiety to prepare for a specific event takes a lot more energy and resolve, but provides the foundation for general anxiety-coping strategies. Children learn that anxiety is normal; it can be spoken to with calming and rational thoughts, and overcome with familiarisation, a back-up plan and courage!

Further reading:

- *The Huge Bag of Worries* by Virginia Ironside (2011) Hodder Children's Books (ages 3-9).
- *What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety* by Dawn Heubner (2005) Magination Press (ages 6-12).
- *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents* by Reid Wilson and Lynn Lyons (2013) Health Communications, Inc. (ages 8-18).

