



NEW JERSEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Taming Your Child's Worries

By Kim Painter, PhD

It is common for children (and adults) to experience anxiety from time to time. In fact, anxiety is quite normal and can serve to motivate and protect us. Anxiety becomes problematic, however, when it grows “too big” and when it keeps us from being able to do our typical day-to-day activities.

You may notice that your child is anxious in a number of ways: your child may talk about feeling worried or scared, you may observe your child avoiding things or situations that cause anxiety, you may notice increased stress, or your child may complain of stomachaches or headaches.

Here are some helpful tips to consider when your child is feeling anxious:

- Allow your child to talk about his or her worries but do not solicit these discussions. Keep conversations about anxiety brief. While talking about worries or fears can be soothing for adults, it often serves to fuel anxiety in children. It is also important not to talk about worries right before bedtime.
- Help your child create new self-talk. Anxiety creeps in and causes your child to think worry-filled thoughts. You can model positive self-talk for your child. For example, you could say, “we aren’t going to let the worry steal our fun!” or “that’s just the worry tricking us into thinking something bad might happen; we know you can handle this just fine.”
- Encourage your child to face fears in small doses. Experiencing the feared situation and seeing that nothing bad happens is key in taming anxiety. As a parent, it is difficult to watch your child feel distress, but remember that anxiety is temporary and will pass.
- Children with anxiety often seek large amounts of reassurance. While brief encouraging statements can be helpful, providing excessive reassurance can actually “grow” the worry. Make a simple, supportive statement and then distract your child.
- Distraction is a powerful coping tool for children. Keep your child’s mind busy so that worry thoughts cannot dominate—play a word game, sing a song, dance, or play a sport.
- Make sure your child is getting enough exercise. The research is very clear that adequate exercise is needed to help manage anxiety.

When anxiety interferes with a child’s ability to participate in and enjoy activities, working with a licensed psychologist can prove very helpful. You and your child can learn coping skills to better manage the worry and keep it from growing too large. It is important to remember that the goal is not to get rid of the worry, but to keep it small enough that it doesn’t get in the way of living life.

Kim Painter, PhD, is a licensed psychologist (NJ #5110) in private practice in Summit, NJ. She specializes in working with children, adolescents, parents/caregivers, and families. She is particularly interested in treating behavior and attention disorders, anxiety, depression, parenting difficulties, and other family-related problems. In addition, Dr. Painter has expertise in working with individuals on the autism spectrum and others who also experience social skills deficits. She is the author of ***Social Skills Groups for Children and Adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome: A Step-by-Step Program***. More information about Dr. Painter's practice can be found at: www.drkimpainter.com.