



Understanding Early Childhood Anxiety

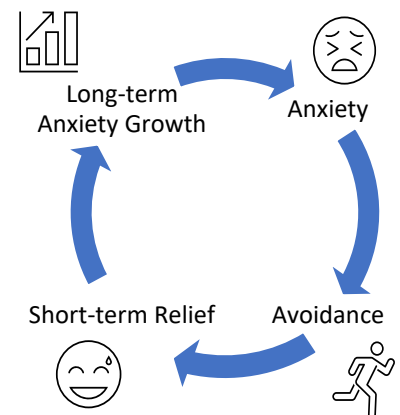
“Anxiety” refers to thoughts, feelings, and behavioral patterns based on fears or worries about the future, changes in routine, or previous difficult experiences. Everyone experiences some anxiety, which is useful for motivating us to complete tasks and stay safe. However, when anxiety happens too often or too strongly, it can get in the way of daily life. When that happens, it may be helpful to seek treatment.

How do children experience anxiety?

- **Physical Responses.** When we're feeling anxious, our body activates the “fight, flight, or freeze” response, and we may notice a range of physical signs: Rapid heartbeat, difficulty breathing, tense muscles, and upset stomach. Young children may not be fully aware of these sensations but complain they don't feel well.
- **Mental Responses.** When we're feeling anxious, we might experience intense feelings of fear and panic. Anxious thoughts, like worries or specific fears, are common. Sometimes these fears can be much bigger than the actual danger or threat. Young children may not have clear thoughts or worries but still feel fearful.

What keeps anxiety going?

- **The Avoidance Cycle.** Anxiety is maintained by a cycle of *avoidance*. When we feel anxious, our reflex is to avoid whatever is making us feel that way. This results in some temporary relief, but it means we will continue to feel anxious in that situation in the long run.
 - To break the cycle of avoidance, we need to experience anxiety-provoking situations and stick with them long enough to teach our brains that it's safe. In anxiety treatment, this is called *exposure*.



How can parents help young kids learn to manage anxiety? Remember, anxiety is normal and useful, so the goal isn't to eliminate anxiety but to manage it.

- **Provide a positive model:** You can show your child how to cope with difficult situations.
 - *Stay calm.* Children look to adults to know how to feel and behave. If you can look cool and confident (even if you don't feel that way), it will help your child be calm, too.
 - *Describe* situations that are scary for your child in a neutral way. Ex: “It looks like a dog is coming our way. We've seen dogs like this before.”

- *Approach* anxiety-provoking scenarios and describe your own behavior. Ex: “I’m going to the door now while you stay here.”
- **Encourage and praise “brave” behavior!** Any time your child is able to approach an anxiety-provoking situation, they should receive lots of recognition and positive attention. Sometimes earning small rewards or privileges for being brave can also be helpful.
 - Ex: “You walked into class all by yourself! I’m so proud of how brave you are!”
- **Try not to avoid situations just because they make your child anxious.** Avoidance encourages anxiety to grow over time. Instead, gradually approach the situations that cause anxiety so your child can learn to be less fearful.
 - Ex: *If your child is unsure of other children at the playground, don’t leave right away. Stay and watch, perhaps gradually playing closer to the other children.*

Prep for Success

What are some behaviors your child exhibits when they feel anxious?

What are some strategies you would like your child to try when they feel anxious? What is some brave behavior you can model and praise?

Other Resources

- To learn more about effective treatments for child anxiety, visit: <https://effectivechildtherapy.org/concerns-symptoms-disorders/disorders/fear-worry-and-anxiety/>
- Books for parents
 - *Freeing your Child from Anxiety: Practical Strategies to Overcome Fears, Worries, and Phobias and Be Prepared for Life– From Toddlers to Teens* by: Tamar Chansky
 - *Growing up Brave: Expert Strategies for Helping Your Child Overcome Fear, Stress, and Anxiety* by: Donna Pincus