

APPROACH INFO – PARENTING SERIES

How to Help Your Anxious Child

Anxiety is a normal emotion that keeps us safe in many situations. However, approximately one in 10 children experience anxiety at a level that substantially impacts their lives. High levels of anxiety often run in families, but may also be learned by observing others or develop after experiencing or witnessing traumatic events.

Parenting an anxious child can be very challenging! Much of the time it is difficult for parents to decipher the most helpful approach. There are several ways that parents of anxious children can encourage their child to gradually overcome anxiety.

Attachment and Paying Attention to Brave Behaviour

Attachment is the emotional bond between parents and their children. When a child receives a response to a behaviour from their parent that is *attachment-rich* (i.e., attentive and emotional), they feel very close to their parent in that moment and are more likely to repeat the behaviour in the future. This is the case whether the emotion the parent demonstrates is positive (e.g., high fives, hugs, praise) or negative (e.g., yelling, put-downs). Anxious behaviour tends to elicit more *attachment-rich* responses from parents, but brave behaviour (for that particular child) often goes unnoticed. In order to make brave behaviour more likely to recur, parents should ensure that brave behaviour elicits *attachment-rich* attention (highly enthusiastic and emotional). Anxious behaviour should elicit *attachment-neutral* responses, involving a calm expectation from the parent that the child will act in a brave way. Appearing calm to your child will send them the message that you are confident in their ability to take the brave option. *Note that it is not crucial for you to feel calm on the inside; take a few deep breaths and harness your acting skills to appear and sound calm!*

Rewards

When trying to increase an anxious child's brave behaviour, rewards become critical. Importantly, rewards need not be

material; they can involve descriptive praise, physical affection, privileges or time together with a parent doing an activity.

Reducing Reassurance

Anxious children tend to seek a lot of reassurance from adults. This may be related to a specific fear, or may be in the form of many questions about the details of an upcoming event or activity. Providing an anxious child with excessive reassurance is unhelpful as it may result in them believing that they need reassurance to cope. Gradually reducing the amount of reassurance you provide will help your child learn that they do not need to know every small detail to be safe, and can reassure themselves if needed.

Approaching, Rather than Avoiding

People tend to cope with anxiety by avoiding the feared object or situation. Over time, avoidance serves to increase fear as there is no opportunity to learn that the feared object or situation is actually safe, and that they can cope. Helping your anxious child to face what they fear in a very gradual way (rather than all at once) will help them to experience success and reduce their anxiety bit by bit. It takes planning and creativity to devise a step-by-step approach but is worth the effort.

Helping Your Child with Their Strong Emotions

When your child is highly emotional, the way to help them manage is to first *validate* what they are feeling (whether or not you agree with it!) so that they feel truly understood. Please see our *Approach Info* sheet on Helping Your Child Manage Their Emotions.

There is only scope in this *Info Sheet* for a brief overview of ways to help an anxious child. If your child's anxiety is substantially impacting your child's functioning or your family, you may benefit from more targeted professional assistance.