



PARENT CONSULTATION | CHILD & ADOLESCENT THERAPY

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Ten Steps for Helping Your Child Face Fears and Learn to Cope

1. Set the stage for your child: Present anxiety as a problem you can solve together. Convey optimism about trying new strategies and the possibility of change.
2. Set goals with your child: Ask your child, “What would you like to be able to do that you can’t do now because you’re so worried or fearful?” Consider writing down these goals with your child and/or having your child draw a picture of what they’d like to be able to do.
3. Normalize anxiety: Tell your child what you worried about as a child or read books together about other children who worry.
4. Respond with empathy: This lets your child know it is o.k. to communicate about feelings, helps your child view you as an ally, and lays the foundation for the difficult work ahead.
5. Create a personalized fear thermometer: Talk to your child about how some things make them very fearful and others only a little and some not at all. Then, create a visual representation of this scale (1 – 10) so that you and your child can communicate about how anxious he or she feels in different situations.
6. Teach the connection between thoughts and feelings: There are lots of strategies to use, but the important concepts to convey are (a) thoughts and feelings are different, (b) thoughts determine how you feel in different situations, (c) not all thoughts are realistic, and (d) you can change the way you think (thereby changing the way you feel).
7. Teach behavioral coping strategies: Explain the concept of a “false alarm” to your child and teach strategies to return the body to a calm state. Using belly breathing works well with younger kids, and often, older kids will have their own ideas of how they can relax.
8. Create a “ladder” that describes a step-by-step approach to your child’s goal: Generate examples of small, incremental steps toward your child’s goal. Start with something very easy so that your child can experience success.
9. Practice, practice, practice: Encourage your child practice relaxation strategies daily, practice identifying thoughts and feelings, and practice steps on their ladder. For the ladder, practice each step multiple times.
10. Reward children for showing brave behaviors: Not all rewards need to be tangible. Consider time in a pleasurable activity as a reward. With young children, immediate rewards work best, but older children can work toward a reward over several days or weeks.