

## INSIGHTS

# Managing your child's anxiety



If your child feels anxious reassure them that these feelings are a normal response to new people, events or potentially challenging situations. Help your child understand that there is a great deal they can do to manage their anxious feelings, so they can get on with the activities they enjoy.

### Explain anxiety

If your child is anxious they may struggle to explain how they feel. An important first step in anxiety self-management is explaining to your child how anxiety works.

- Teach your child that the amygdala, the part of the brain that protects them, is always on high alert when they are anxious.
- Explain that the amygdala sees danger where there is none, but the body prepares to fight for life or flee from danger as if it's protecting them from a hungry lion.
- Talk about the changes that happen in their body to power them up to fight or flee including; increased heart and breathing rates and the pumping of the blood from the stomach to the arms and legs, which can cause nausea and even vomiting for some.

### Help recognise anxiety-inducing events

Help your child to recognise the specific situations and events that make them feel anxious such as meeting new friends, sitting tests and fear of rejection. In this way you can help your child manage and minimise his feelings of anxiety.

### Respond with empathy

When your child feels anxious, the part of the brain that controls rational thinking, decision-making and concentration temporarily goes offline. They can feel easily overwhelmed by simple, everyday events and situations. Rather than protecting your child by allowing them to avoid meeting these challenges, or dismissing them as trivial, validate their feelings with statements such as "I can see you're feeling worried about going to camp without your brother."

### Managing anxious moments

Help your child develop the tools to regulate and push their anxious feelings to the background. Practise these anxiety management tools when your child is feeling calm, and it will be easier for them to practise when they are nervous. These include:

- Taking some deep breaths: Deep belly breathing from the diaphragm calms the amygdala, reducing feelings of anxiousness

# parenting \* ideas

- Bringing their attention back to the present: Use their senses to bring their attention to the present moment and away from their worries – “Tell me five things you see, four things you hear and something you smell”
- Getting them moving: Physical exercise is not only a great distraction but it releases feel-good endorphins that help children and young people feel better and more optimistic about the future
- Defusing their thoughts: Help your child to distance themselves from their thoughts by using distancing statements. Replace “I’m going to fail the test” with “I had a thought that I’m going to fail the test.” Rather than changing their thinking, assist your child to distance themselves from unhelpful thoughts

There’s a great deal you can do to help your child manage their anxiety. Start by assisting your child to understand the fundamentals of anxiety, show your understanding of their feelings and be ready to support them emotionally to push their anxiety to the background.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia’s leading parenting educators. He’s an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.