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# HELPING CHILDREN DEVELOP HEALTHY WAYS TO COPE WITH ANXIETY

Mental Health Concerns, Volume 6 by Anita Pal, M.Sc., RMFT

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## **Anxiety in Children**

Contrary to what some might think, children experience anxiety on a daily (sometimes may seem like an hourly) basis! Anxiety is a normal reaction to change or in anticipation of change. In fact, human beings rely on anxiety as a signal that something needs to be noticed or attended to.

Anxiety, however, can prove unhelpful if it becomes paired with feelings of helplessness. This combination can become a barrier to your child accomplishing age appropriate developmental tasks and can contribute to long term problems.

Examples of “unhelpful” forms of anxiety include anxiety that leads to school avoidance behaviours or somatic complaints such as frequent stomach aches or headaches. Anxiety is also unhelpful if it is interfering with your child getting to sleep or staying asleep. Long term feelings of high anxiety and helplessness can also contribute to development of adult anxiety disorders and eating disorders. Children with perfectionism or unrealistic expectations that they should be able to do everything right the first time may experience high levels of anxiety about trying new things. This can impede a child from taking the risks necessary to learn new skills or prevent them from developing the emotional tolerance to deal with the uncertainty of new situations.

Children can also experience strong feelings of anxiety as a result of family disruptions such as changes in schools, moving households, divorce, loss, or witnessing domestic violence. Other contributing situations can include performance based expectations connected to competitive sports or activities, or in relation to school based expectations that they may feel unable to meet.

## **Books for Parents:**

**Helping Your Socially Vulnerable Child: What to Do When Your Child Is Shy, Socially Anxious, Withdrawn or Bullied.**  
Andrew Eisen & Linda Engler

**Helping Your Child Overcome Separation Anxiety or School Refusal.** Andrew Eisen, Linda Engler, & Joshua Sparrow

**Coping with an Anxious or Depressed Child.**  
Samantha Cartwright-Hatton

## **Online:**

**Canadian Children’s Rights Council**  
[http://www.canadiancrc.com/Bullying\\_Canada.aspx](http://www.canadiancrc.com/Bullying_Canada.aspx)

## **Books for Children and Teens:**

**Fighting Invisible Tigers: Stress Management for Teens, 3rd Edition.** Earl Hipp,

**The Anxiety Workbook for Teens.** Lisa Schab

**Is a Worry Worrying You?** Ferida Wolff & Harriet May Savitz, illustrated by Marie Le Tourneau (story book for younger children)

**What to Do When Good Enough Isn’t Good Enough: the Real Deal on Perfectionism.**  
Thomas S. Greenspon (for ages 9 – 13)

**For more information about child based anxiety issues feel free to contact Anita Pal at [anitapal@rogers.com](mailto:anitapal@rogers.com) or call (705)321-6267.**

## Tips to Help Children Cope

Whatever the cause of the anxiety, there are a number of constructive things that a parent can do to assist their child.

1) Let your child know that **anxiety is normal** and everyone gets anxious. Explain that it is the body's way of checking out what is going on around you. Anxiety is only a state. Even if you do nothing, it will pass. Rather than try and fight the anxiety, teach your child to explore anxiety as simply another feeling or sensation with curiosity rather than fear.

2) Help your child **set realistic expectations** around performance. For example all the great athletes or even geniuses spend an average of 10,000 hours perfecting their expertise. The objective of trying new things is not to get it right the first time but simply to see if this will be an activity that you might enjoy and want to do more of. Encourage your child to try new things and take risks.

3) Teach your child how to **self calm** by making sure they are breathing. The most typical physiological response for an adult or a child when experiencing anxiety is to hold their breath. Holding your breath sends a signal to the brain to increase adrenaline, which in turn increases the sensation of anxiety. By breathing slow deep breathes this calms the nervous system and signals to the brain that all is well. A good trick for young children is to have them learn to blow bubbles or blow on a pinwheel as this teaches the same motions as deep breathing (works for grown ups too!)

4) **Sort out the root cause of the anxiety** if it appears to be a recurring issue (for example, does it always occur before a child is scheduled to alternate between two parents in a divorced family). Once you have identified the transition that appears to trigger the anxiety, do a little research to see if there is some way to make the transition easier for your child.

4) Help your child **develop daily routines**. For

example, everyone needs healthy sleep routines (including teens and adults). These routines should include a period of preparing the body for sleep such as having a bath, snack, and some kind of wind down activity for 15 to 20 minutes before lights out (note watching TV before bed is not recommended for children as research shows that it tends to over stimulate certain areas of the brain in young children).

5) Examine the **boundaries** that exist for your child. If parent/child boundaries are too rigid or too flexible this can produce anxiety for children. Extremely rigid boundaries prevent children from doing things and taking risks that may be necessary in their development. On the other hand, no boundaries create chaos and unpredictability in the household and will increase feelings of anxiety about personal safety and over expose your child to adult information that the child can have no influence or control over. Most problematic for children are households where parents have opposing concepts of parenting and parent/child boundaries.

## When to seek Professional Help

If you notice that anxiety is a recurring problem for your child and that it is interfering with their normal functioning at home or at school, seeing a qualified mental health professional can help. Also ask your child about school. Sometimes symptoms of anxiety, especially if they developed quickly, are a sign that your child is being bullied. When seeking services for your child do not hesitate to ask lots of questions of therapists you may consider. If you have access to a paediatrician this can be a good place to start to ask for a referral to a qualified therapist. The internet can also be a source of starting information to explore local resources in your community.