

Helping Your Child Cope with Anxiety

I'm willing to bet that every person reading this has experienced anxiety, depression, or stress at one point or another in his or her life. **I'm also willing to bet that it wasn't a pleasant experience.** For as many as one in eight children, anxiety is a daily struggle (according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America). Anxiety in children can cause struggles in education, social situations, and can lead to bigger problems as they grow older.

For gifted children, anxiety can be an even greater struggle. The very traits that define giftedness, separating the gifted child from the smart kid – that incredible creativity, cognitive awareness, and intensity – those characteristics make gifted children more aware and potentially emotional about their surroundings. This ability to take it all in, even those details that escape most children, can lead to over excitabilities and produce anxious children.

Gifted Children are Different

Consider your five-year-old gifted child. He can carry on conversations with much older individuals, and prefers to play strategy games like chess, mastermind, and others. He seeks out the company of older kids and young adults because, intellectually, they're his peers, but, he is still five. **His emotions and maturity aren't in the same place as his intellect, and so he acts his age, turning off the very kids he most needs to play with.** They don't want to play with a baby...and he feels rejected and isolated, and anxious in social situations – where he doesn't really fit in.

Gifted children often put extremely high expectations on themselves. They want to do things perfectly, and exactly as they're pictured in their minds. These expectations can cause stress and anxiety, oftentimes shutting kids down, paralyzing them from trying at all.

Anxiety in gifted children is a huge problem. Anxiety in any child is a huge problem. So, how can we help?

Identifying Anxiety in Children

There are as many ways that anxiety manifests itself in children as there are children themselves. **One of the first steps in helping our children is to recognize that that they are struggling with anxiety in the first place.** Some symptoms of anxiety include:

- Irritability
- Not able to relax
- Tension
- Competitiveness
- Withdrawal from friends
- Physical complaints
- Fatigue
- Stomachaches
- Headaches
- Underachievement
- Impatience
- Drastic changes
- Attitude
- Temperament
- Rapid breathing
- Unprompted/inappropriate behavior
- Outbursts
- Tantrums
- Withdrawal
- Insomnia
- Excessive sleeping
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Inability to concentrate
- Fidgeting
- Toilet issues
- Persistent worrying
- Changes in eating habits
- Shaking, trembling and sweating

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Helping Children Overcome Anxiety

No matter how anxiety manifests itself in your gifted child, you want to help him or her overcome those debilitating feelings. There are many things you can do to help your children overcome anxiety, and lots of advice out there, but ultimately you need to know your child, and figure out what will work best for him or her as an individual. Some strategies to try include:

- **Validate your child's feelings of anxiety.** The feelings are real and okay, but need to be managed so that the unpleasantness can be minimized.
- **Teach coping skills like deep breathing.** Deep, slow breathing techniques have a calming and soothing effect and is a portable skill – one children can use in all situations to self soothe.
- **Listen to your child's thoughts and fears, and ask questions.** Let your child know that you are there for him and no worry is too big or small to bring to you.
- **Encourage your child to be proactive.** Ask, "What are some things I can do to make it better?" "How likely is it that the things you're concerned about will happen?" Helping your child brainstorm ideas and solutions will empower him or her to handle whatever comes.
- **Affirm your child's attempts at bravery.** "Hooray! You slept in your room all night last night! I'm so proud of you." Find little things to affirm and celebrate.
- **Role-play with your child.** Outline the small steps he or she can take to overcome anxieties. Practice those steps. Create opportunities for your child to act those steps out.

Show your child that anxiety is normal. When you're feeling anxious, talk about it out loud. Say, within your child's earshot, what you can do to calm yourself down, "Okay... I'm not a fan of speaking to new people, but I can do this. Deep breaths..." Let him or her see you centering yourself.

Working with your child to overcome anxiety can be one of those "one step ahead, two steps back" type endeavors. **You think you're making progress, and then you're right back where you were.** It's okay.

Your job is to support your child in a loving and empathetic way. Be there for him or her. Love wholeheartedly.

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