



# PSYCH HACKS

## Five Ways to Help your Anxious Child

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health concerns among kids and teens today. Different from developmentally appropriate fears, anxiety is characterized by persistent and uncontrollable worry in the absence of a real danger. Seeing a child suffer from anxiety is one of the most distressing things a parent can face. Part of what makes child anxiety so distressing to a parent is that they often are unsure how to help. Fortunately, there are many things you can do as a parent to help your anxious child. Below are five specific ways to help your child overcome anxiety.

### #1: The Hidden Danger of Reassurance

Children with anxiety worry...a lot. Naturally, they often communicate these worries to their parents or caregivers. When a parent hears a child convey a worry, their instinctual response is to provide reassurance in an effort to alleviate the distress. While providing your child with reassurance may appear to help in the short-term, it only serves to elevate their anxiety in the long run. Excessive reassurance can lead to the child becoming dependent on the reassurance to feel safe and get through a worry. What's more, by relying on reassurance from adults, a child is deprived of the opportunity to develop a tolerance for uncertainty and a sense of competence that they can independently manage distress.



### #2: Praise those Skills!



Parents often ask, “well, if I shouldn’t reassure my child, then what *do* I do?” It is normal for caregivers to feel guilty as they begin to stop providing reassurance. It is important to keep in mind that when the frequency of reassurance is scaled down, an opportunity opens up for your child to learn the critical skill of managing distress independently. Instead of providing reassurance, encourage and praise the usage of healthy coping strategies such as taking several deep breaths, making coping self-statements (e.g., “I can do this”), or problem-solving through a worry.

### #3: Scheduled Worry Time

Children with anxiety have trouble “turning off” their worries. Setting aside 5-15 minutes each day to purposefully worry will help your child learn to set limits on worrying. This makes it easier for children to learn not to pay attention and “give in” to worries during other parts of the day. For younger children, it is recommended that parents participate in scheduled worry time to help the child problem-solve and encourage use of healthy coping skills. If your child brings up a worry outside of scheduled-worry-time, gently remind them that the worry will have to wait until the scheduled time set aside.



### #4: Avoid Avoidance



Children with anxiety are driven to avoid or escape situations that elicit anxiety. Many parents are understandably inclined to remove their child from the anxiety eliciting situation. Unfortunately, facilitating such avoidance only serves to strengthen the anxiety in the long run. Instead, caregivers are encouraged to empathize with their child and encourage use of healthy coping skills when encountering anxiety-eliciting situations. It is important to remember that allowing children to “ride it out” not only helps with anxiety desensitization, but also helps the child develop a sense of mastery and a willingness to challenge themselves.

### #5: Model, Model, Model!

Anxiety does not discriminate by age as many adults experience their own struggles with anxiety as well. A child’s parent or caregiver is often their biggest role model, and children internalize what they see and hear from the adults closest to them. If you as a parent are going to help your child learn healthy ways to manage anxiety, it is vital that you model those healthy ways in your own life as well. While it may not be apparent in the moment, seeing a parent acknowledge and manage their own anxiety is one of the most powerful things a child can witness.



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