



Anxiety Master

How to Help An Anxious Child

Dear Parent & Carers,

Your greatest hope is to see your child grow, adapt, and navigate life's hurdles with competence.

It's immensely relieving when your child courageously adjusts to their environment.

Their success affirms your nurturing role, reassuring you that your child is progressing toward finding their place in the world.

Conversely, standing by helplessly as your child grapples with anxiety can be deeply distressing.

In these circumstances, you may wonder:

- Have I somehow failed them?
- Could I have done something differently?
- Is it my fault?
- How can I help this precious little being?

If these concerns resonate, you're not alone, and you've done nothing wrong.

Your self-reflection indicates a genuine desire to help your child grow and learn.

To support your child, you must first understand anxiety and then view it from your child's perspective.

This guide offers practical, tried-and-tested strategies from my professional practice as a qualified teacher and registered therapist to help your child manage and overcome anxiety.

I'm confident of your progress if you follow these steps.

With care and support, Dominic

[PS. You can listen to an audio version of this guide via the Anxiety Master podcast HERE.](#)



Anxiety 101: A Brief Overview

Before the specific steps, let's review the role and function of anxiety.

A degree of anxiety is essential. Defined as a feeling of worry or unease about something with an uncertain outcome, fear motivates us to:

- Act upon concerns
- Avoid careless decisions
- Step back from dangerous acts

Taking foolish risks would be expected without anxiety as a behaviour modifier, and we wouldn't have come far as a species.

So, anxiety - in moderation - is beneficial for your child. Our goal is to help your child manage this survival mechanism effectively.

Understanding Childhood Anxiety: Recognising Triggers and Offering Support

Anxiety arises when a child perceives a physical or psychological threat and believes they lack the necessary skills or resources to manage it.

This stress response typically manifests as a child feeling unsafe and fearing uncertain or unfamiliar situations.

Anxiety can be considered a helpful warning system. However, for overly anxious children, the alarms are often triggered by non-existent or exaggerated dangers.

The causes of alarm can vary significantly among children. Early life encounters may fuel a child's vigilance to danger.

For instance, prior teasing experience may inhibit a child's expression - for fear of further ridicule or rejection.

If a child has had to confront distressing situations or has witnessed others (parents or siblings) struggling, they might anticipate their failure or inability to cope.

As a result, a child may avoid the very situations they need to confront to calm themselves down. Thus, the threat remains unabated, and the anxiety continues unchallenged.



Childhood anxiety can manifest in various ways:

- Fear of being left alone in bed, especially in the dark
- Separation anxiety, such as feeling distressed when saying goodbye at the school gates
- Social phobia, displayed as intense shyness, unwillingness to speak in front of peers, or hesitation to interact for fear of making mistakes
- Selective mutism is an extreme fear of speaking that compels the child to remain silent.
- Specific phobias, such as fear of the dark, unfamiliar animals, loud noises, or imaginary monsters — essentially, anything unknown or unpredictable
- Obsessive-compulsive tendencies - recurrent, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and/or repetitive behaviours (compulsions)

Understanding that false alarms (rather than real dangers) trigger most fears can help you better assist your child in managing anxiety.

Against this backdrop, let's cover the steps you can implement with your child to address their anxiety.

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Against this backdrop, here are the first steps you can implement with your child to address anxiety.

Step 1. Clarify the Messages Your Child Receives



Children learn from adults what is safe and what is not. They also learn from significant figures when and how to react anxiously.

If we broadcast anxiety, this is what children will pick up.

To mitigate this, we can start by observing a child's environment and the messages they receive from their surroundings. For instance, is the child exposed to anxious individuals, e.g. within the family?

If an adult consistently displays anxiety, a child might internalize this behaviour as a normal response.

It's worth noting that adults unintentionally transmit anxiety to children in many ways, not all obvious.

For example:

- Being overly protective
- Rushing to the rescue too quickly
- Permitting the child to avoid challenging situations

While these behaviours are usually well-meant, they unintentionally signal to the child that persistent danger exists and risks must be avoided.

The underlying message becomes: The world is unsafe. You best be careful.

To the young mind, this message complicates the ability to adopt personal control and manage transitions or new situations, reinforcing the cycle of anxiety.

By understanding these dynamics, you can adjust your responses to promote a degree of risk-taking instead of avoidance or fear of failure.

Questions to consider:

- How and when might my child be receiving anxious messages from their environment?
- What can I do to mitigate these messages?
- Do I demonstrate a measured and positive attitude to risk-taking?



Step 2. Check the information and specifics

The next step is to converse with your child about their specific fears. In other words, you must identify the source - the underlying belief - that fuels your child's anxiety.

This is the investigative work - the persistent information-gathering phase to help you and your child articulate their concerns.

Why is this significant?

It's not uncommon for children to misinterpret information, and the confusion of misinterpretation may cause unnecessary anxiety.

For instance, a child might develop a fear of germs or disease if they've been exposed to partial or misleading information without a thorough explanation.

As a result, a child may draw incorrect conclusions and develop unfounded worries.



As the parent or carer, your role involves resolving to understand your child's fears precisely.

After clarifying their worries, you want to collaborate with your child to construct a plan. This plan will outline what you can do if your child's fears become a reality.

Let's imagine your child fears answering questions in class because they're worried about getting the answer wrong and upsetting their teacher.

This worry keeps them silent, even when they know the answers.

To understand the specifics, you begin a calm, patient conversation about their classroom fears.

You might ask, "Can you tell me more about what happens when you think about answering a question in class?"

They might express their fear that a wrong answer would upset their teacher or invite ridicule from their peers.

These articulated worries often reveal a disproportionate fear of a modest threat.

Next, gently explore the realism of these fears.

You might ask:

Has the teacher ever responded angrily to a wrong answer?

Has a peer ever mocked a mistake?

Establishing a fact-based foundation for these fears is crucial to determine if they're amplified purely by anxiety or are rooted in an actual event.

If these fears are mostly anxiety-induced, it's time to construct a supportive action plan with your child. This plan might involve role-playing a class scenario.

You could play the role of the teacher, reacting with understanding and encouragement when your child - playing themselves - answers a question incorrectly.

This role-play humanises the teacher's role and demonstrates that mistakes are learning opportunities, not just occasions for fear or shame.

It shows your child that wrong answers can lead to understanding and progress, not just ridicule or reprimands.

Through this process, your child learns that their fear can be managed, their teacher is there to guide them, and their classroom is a safe space for learning, even when they make mistakes.



If the fear persists, you can ask your child what they want you to do.

Talk the options through to their logical conclusions and assure your child that the matter can be resolved.

This proactive involvement in addressing their fear boosts their confidence, provides practical coping strategies, and reduces anxiety.

As a rule, these parent-child conversations work best during calm and quiet times – well ahead of potentially stressful situations.

For instance, Sunday evenings provide an apt time to review the upcoming week and any concerns your child may have.

Step 3. Graded Exposure: Tackle Fears Step-by-Step

One effective strategy to help a child cope with their anxiety is through a process called 'graded exposure'.

This technique involves breaking down the situation that causes fear into smaller, more manageable steps.

Think of it as teaching a child to swim.

Instead of pushing them in at the deep end, you start in the shallow area, then gradually go towards deeper waters as they become more comfortable and confident.

Let's consider a few examples:

- If a child is scared of dogs, the initial step could be showing them pictures of dogs. Once they are comfortable with this, you could progress to watching videos of dogs.
- The next step could be observing a dog from a distance in a safe environment. Eventually, they might be ready to pet a friendly dog under supervision.
- If a child experiences separation anxiety at school, you could start by spending a few hours at school with them. Over time, you can gradually reduce your presence - perhaps stay in a different room, then the school lobby, and finally, start leaving them at school for increasing lengths of time.
- For a child with social anxiety, you might start by encouraging playdates with a single friend. Once they're comfortable with one-on-one interactions, you could gradually introduce more friends into the playdate. This could progress to more extensive social settings, like birthday parties or school events.

It's crucial to acknowledge and celebrate every success, no matter how modest. Immediate celebrations of progress provide positive reinforcement and encourage your child to continue their efforts.

Celebration-sharing might involve cooking your child's favourite meal, spending quality time together, or participating in a fun after-school activity.

Focussing your child's attention on their progress as they gradually confront their fears will validate their effort and bolster their courage to take the next step.

The intention is to help the child experience success and reassurance as they gradually face their fears. By rewarding progress, you validate effort and bolster their courage to take the next step.



Step 4. Master Calm: Teach Your Child to Breathe



Breathing exercises are incredibly effective tools for managing anxiety. Teaching your child these techniques can give them a valuable skill to self-soothe when they start feeling anxious.

Breathing deeply and consciously signals to the body that there's no immediate danger and thus helps to reduce feelings of fear and panic.

Many children and adults are unaware of their breathing patterns and how they either calm or exacerbate anxious responses.

Start by demonstrating and practising these exercises with your child during calm moments.

This could include techniques like slow, deep breathing or "square breathing" (breathe in for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, breathe out for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4).

Make these exercises part of your daily routine, perhaps during quiet moments in the morning or before bed at night.

The goal is to ensure that when anxiety strikes, your child will be equipped with these calming techniques.

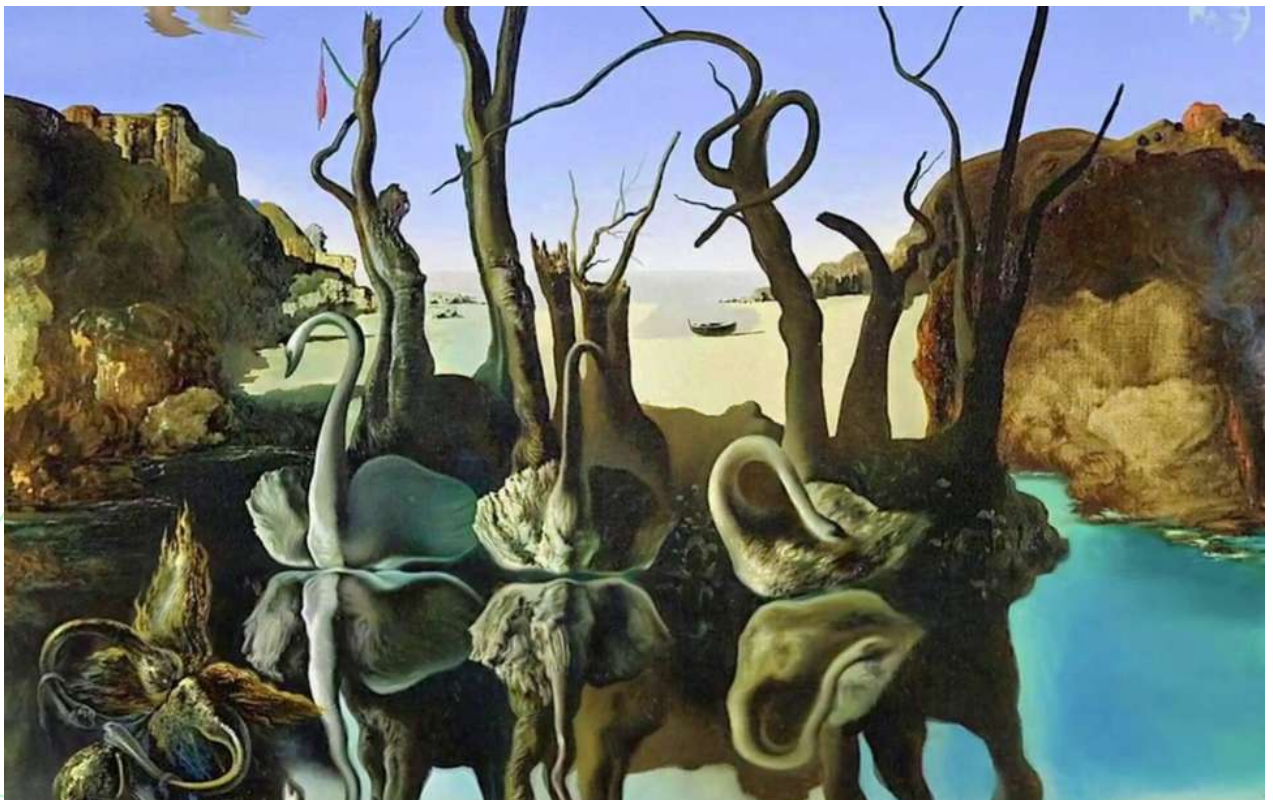
In future posts, I will provide more detailed exercises and techniques you can practice with your child. This will equip both of you with additional tools to manage anxiety effectively.

Step 5. Harness Your Child's Imagination: Turning A Potential Enemy into An Ally

Children possess vivid and potent imaginations. They use this creative force to explore, learn, and play.

However, when it comes to anxiety, this imagination can sometimes become a double-edged sword.

Imaginative children may create unfavourable scenarios in their minds and believe these to be a reality, which can exacerbate anxiety.



Swans Reflecting Elephants (1937) is a painting by the Spanish surrealist Salvador Dalí.

This image has been an excellent resource to support the following activity.

Here's a hands-on exercise that I've found to be particularly effective in helping children comprehend and balance their imagination:

- **Choose a Thought-Provoking Image:** Start by sharing a thought-provoking image with your child - something that inspires creativity, like Salvador Dali's surreal painting 'Swans Reflecting Elephants'.
- **Ask Open-Ended Questions:** Ask your child some open-ended questions about the image, such as, "What do you think is happening in this picture?", "Why do you think the swans are reflecting as elephants in the water?" or "What could this picture represent?"
- **Let the Imagination Run Wild:** Encourage your child to weave a story around the image. Their narrative doesn't have to make sense; the point is to let their imagination run free and demonstrate its power.
- **Link Imagination to Anxiety:** Once they've spun a tale, point out how active their imagination is and gently suggest that this imaginative power might sometimes paint scary pictures related to their anxiety triggers. For instance, they might imagine failing a test, even though they've prepared well.
- **Discuss How to Balance Imagination:** Discuss how this creative power can be used positively, such as brainstorming solutions for their concerns or visualising success in confronting their fears. This discussion will help them understand that while their imagination can cause worry, it can also be harnessed for problem-solving and resilience.

This exercise encourages children to recognise the extent of their imaginative power and its influence on their anxiety.

By doing so, they can learn to balance this power and use it positively to cope with and overcome anxiety.

And, finally, to our last step in the guide ...

Step 6. Boost Resilience: The Role of Exercise and Diet

Maintaining physical health through regular exercise and a balanced diet is essential in managing anxiety in children.

Let's delve into some specifics to understand better how these elements contribute to a child's mental well-being.



Exercise helps naturally boost mood and reduce stress by promoting the release of endorphins, the body's 'feel-good' hormones. It also serves as a healthy outlet for children to express their emotions and relieve stress.

For instance, encouraging your child to participate in a sport they enjoy provides an opportunity for regular exercise, a social outlet, and a chance to develop resilience and confidence.

Activities like cycling, swimming, or even simply playing in the park can significantly reduce feelings of anxiety. Incorporating regular, fun physical activity into your child's routine is a practical way to alleviate anxiety symptoms.

Yoga and mindfulness-based exercises are beneficial for children struggling with anxiety.

They promote self-awareness, emotional regulation, and relaxation. A simple daily routine that includes stretching or basic yoga poses can profoundly affect a child's mental health.

As for diet, a balanced intake of nutrients significantly affects a child's mental health. Certain foods can influence mood, energy levels, and the overall ability to manage anxiety.

- Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon, walnuts, and flaxseeds, support brain health and improve mood. Incorporating these foods into your child's diet can help manage anxiety symptoms.
- Whole grains like oats and brown rice help maintain steady blood sugar levels and offer a stable energy supply. Spikes and crashes in blood sugar levels can worsen anxiety, and these foods can be beneficial in regulating mood and balancing glycemia.
- A healthy gut has also been linked to lower anxiety levels. Incorporate foods rich in probiotics, such as yoghurt, kefir, or fermented vegetables like kimchi or sauerkraut, into your child's diet to foster a healthier gut.
- Ensure your child stays hydrated. Dehydration can cause fatigue and affect concentration, heightening anxiety in some children.
- Limit the intake of caffeine and sugar, which can spike energy levels and lead to crashes/slumps that exacerbate feelings of anxiety.

Remember, making dietary changes should be a gradual process tailored to your child's preferences to ensure sustainability.

While it might seem like common knowledge, the impact of nutrition on a child's ability to manage anxiety cannot be overstated.

Maintaining a balance of physical health through exercise and a balanced diet helps foster resilience. It equips your child with the necessary energy to manage their anxiety effectively.

Implementing the prior steps will help your child to calm emotional distress.

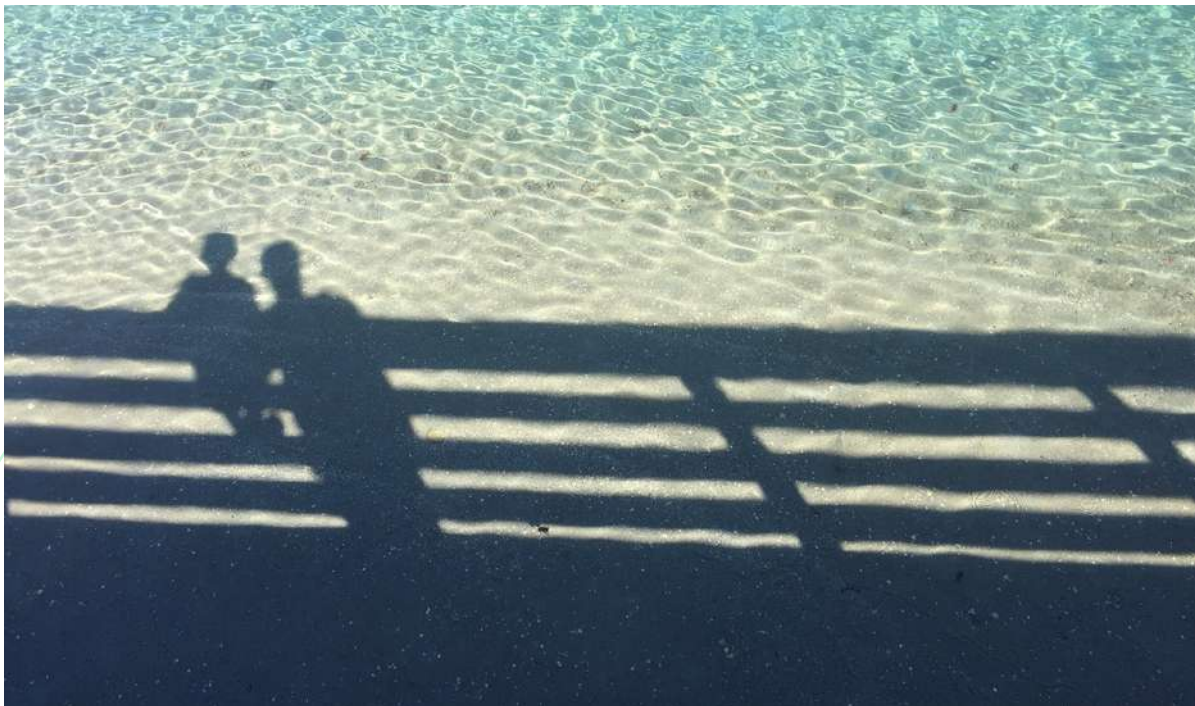
It's worth noting that your role as the significant adult in your child's life will profoundly impact how your child deals with anxiety.

One of the primary duties of a parent or carer is to teach your child that life involves tolerating a degree of uncertainty.

Conclusion: Navigating the Journey of An Anxious Child

Helping your child navigate the stormy seas of anxiety is often challenging, Implementing the steps outlined in this article will significantly impact your child's attitude toward stress and anxiety. Remember these key points:

- Understand your child's perception of threats
- Verify their fears
- Utilize gradual exposure
- Teach them calming techniques
- Help them maintain a healthy lifestyle, and
- Harness the power of their imagination.



Your influence and support are invaluable as the primary adult figure in your child's life.

Your reactions, behaviours, and attitudes can significantly affect how your child responds to anxiety.

When you model calmness and resilience in the face of uncertainty, you provide a powerful blueprint for your child to emulate.

Conclusion: Navigating the Journey of An Anxious Child

The parenting journey may have its share of hiccups, and progress may sometimes seem slow. Still, it's important to remember that every step forward is a victory, no matter how small.

It's essential to teach your child that life, by design, involves tolerating a degree of uncertainty.

By demonstrating that you can face uncertainties with composure and good nature, you demonstrate one of the most valuable life skills: resilience.

Anxiety doesn't have to define your child's life. With the right tools, guidance, and support, they can learn to manage their stress and stride confidently through the world.

You have the power to guide them on this path.



Acknowledging When Professional Help is Necessary

While this guide offers practical strategies for managing your child's anxiety, they are not a substitute for professional assistance in severe cases.

Anxiety is typical, but when it severely impacts your child's daily life, schoolwork, and social interactions, professional help may be required.

Persistent worry, avoidance behaviours, sleep issues, and physical symptoms like chronic stomachaches or headaches can indicate the need for professional guidance.

Healthcare providers like psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical social workers, and paediatricians are well-equipped to diagnose and treat childhood anxiety disorders.

Notably, paediatricians can often spot mental health issues first, providing valuable referrals to specialists if needed.

Remember, the strategies in this guide can bolster but not replace professional treatment for severe anxiety. Intense or persistent anxiety disorders often necessitate professional intervention.

If you're worried about your child's anxiety, always consult a healthcare provider or a qualified mental health professional.

Thank you for your interest in this guide.

Anxiety Master is a one man project on a mission to help each person become their own Anxiety Master, i.e., to confront life's worries and challenges with calm, strength and confidence.

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