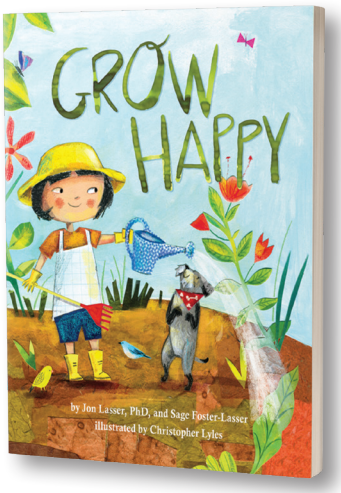
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

How Positive Psychology Can Help Kids With Anxiety by Jon Lasser, PhD



Feeling worried or anxious sometimes is part of being a person, so it's not surprising that all kids experience some anxiety from time to time. Depending on the child's age and development, situational anxiety may be felt when separating from parents or caregivers, reading aloud at school, or when trying to join a social group. In most cases, parents and teachers can do a lot to help kids cope with these feelings.

When anxiety interferes with school, work or relationships and persists over a long period of time, a psychologist may be able to assist to determine whether a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder or some other concern is appropriate. In such cases, therapy may be recommended to support the child's needs. Play therapy and cognitive behavior therapy are common interventions. Though some therapies can only be provided by a professional with specialized training and skills, there are some psychological approaches that are available to parents and caregivers and can be used at home and in the community to support all kids, including those who are anxious. Here are some tools that parents and other caregivers can try.

Supportive Patience

One of the best ways to support an anxious child is to show unconditional love and support.

All children need to know that they are loved and accepted for who they are, even when they are engaging in behaviors that may be worrisome to others.

Sometimes adults may pressure children to push through their fears or overcome their worries, but in many cases this approach is counterproductive. Forcing a child to do something that provokes anxiety is likely to worsen the situation. For example, if a child is visibly anxious about attending a dance class, the child may be best supported when adults acknowledge the worry and give the child the opportunity to make a choice about going to the class. This may be difficult for some parents or caregivers, but it may be helpful to take the child's perspective.

Positive Psychology

We've learned a lot about what makes us happy, and our psychological needs for happiness. The research findings in the area of positive psychology, the study of wellness, are helpful tools that parents and caregivers can easily access.

As parents and caregivers, we must recognize that these basic needs must be met for our children to be well.

- Competence (I'm capable; I'm good at some things)
- Autonomy (I have some freedom to choose; I can do some things independently)
- Belongingness (I am loved; I'm part of a family)

Note that positive psychology doesn't demand that we're always happy. That's unrealistic. Rather, we can be our best by making sure we're taking care of our needs, and those of our children.

Kids are more likely to be well when they feel competent at tasks. Giving them opportunities to be helpful around the house allows them to build skills and develop a feeling of being capable. To support the development of competence, parents and caregivers should be aware that it's good for kids to struggle a little, but not too much. If the task is too difficult, kids can't feel accomplished. Similarly, if the task is too easy, there's little satisfaction. When kids try something that's a bit challenging and improve with practice, competence emerges.

Earlier the importance of not forcing a child to do something that made her feel anxious was mentioned as a way of supporting her needs, and this is an example of autonomy, or the freedom to choose. Of course, kids can't have absolute freedom, so parents and caregivers have to grant autonomy when it makes sense.

Belongingness may be the most important need. We are social creatures who need to be loved and feel like we belong. Unfortunately, some adults withdraw love as a punishment or as a means of expressing disappointment. For example, the child who is anxious about going to a birthday party may be best supported with hugs and words of love, such as, "I know that you're worried about going to the party." An adult response that communicates anger, disappointment or shame will not support the child and may undermine his sense of belongingness.

Choice Theory

Another tool available to parents and caregivers is choice theory, which focuses on the choices we make to meet our needs. By trying to understand kids through the lens of choice theory, we may develop greater compassion and understanding. A child who struggles with anxiety may have one or more needs that are not satisfied. From this perspective, parents and caregivers can support kids by helping them identify their needs and encouraging them to make choices that will help them meet those needs.

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When we think about what a child wants, we are better able to separate our wants from theirs. Perhaps the child never wanted to take dance classes, but the parent or caregiver assumed she did. Or perhaps the child wants to take dance classes, but on her own terms. When we give children opportunities to reflect on their desires and make choices, we help them build autonomy and competence. The act of listening to kids and empowering them to act shows them that they are loved and that they belong.

Bibliotherapy

Reading books with kids can help them think about their feelings, consider solutions and problem solve. Books are familiar to children and are engaging. Reading a book about an anxious mouse may feel less threatening than talking about one's own problems directly. Parents and caregivers may offer children a few relevant, age-appropriate books and allow the child to select one that is appealing. In some cases it may be helpful to talk about the story with the child after reading the book, or ask whether the child identified with a character in the story. In some cases, reading the book may be enough.

The approaches described here may be used at home as a way of helping a child who is anxious and may also be helpful when a child is seeing a therapist as an additional support. By showing a child that you love them and care about their feelings, you can play an important role in fostering their wellness.

This article is based on Grow Happy *by Jon Lasser, PhD, and Sage Foster-Lasser*