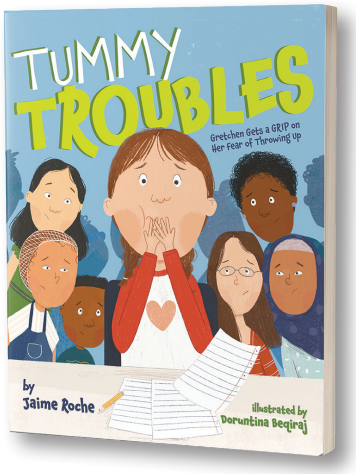
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Dos and Don'ts for Helping Children Manage Anxiety



Tummy Troubles: How Gretchen Gets a GRIP on Her Fear of Throwing Up by Jaime Roche, follows Gretchen as she navigates her way through her newly developed fear of vomiting with the help of her school counselor and the ground, refocus, inflate, and pause (GRIP) technique. In the Reader's Note, Dr. Donald Merriman explores anxiety in general, and emetophobia, or the severe fear of vomiting or seeing others vomit. He also offers some tips for helping children manage anxiety. Here's an abridged excerpt from the Reader's Note with those tips.

Anxiety—a subjective sense of worry, apprehension, or fear—is an increasingly common problem for children and adolescents. While it is normal for everyone to feel anxious from time to time, around 9 percent, or roughly 5.5 million kids, have excessive fears and worries that can keep them from enjoying life.

The first step in helping children cope is to validate their feelings and demystify anxiety. It is important, and very helpful, for children to know that they are not alone in their experience. Furthermore, help them understand that the thoughts they are having, and the physiological response triggered by those thoughts, although unpleasant, are not dangerous. With support, they can learn to overcome their fear.

Dos and Don'ts for Helping Children Manage Anxiety

Facing anxiety requires courage and persistence. Even when armed with effective strategies, facing anxiety is uncomfortable. Children must resist the urge to escape and avoid uncomfortable feelings. It is vitally important that children understand that to master anxiety, they must "sit with" and endure some uncomfortable feelings, but these feelings will not persist indefinitely.

While there is no single right way to handle a child's fears, there are ways you can act that will help support your child. There are also behaviors that can inadvertently maintain or even increase anxiety.

DO Push compassionately: As a parent or caregiver, you must help your child push through their anxiety. However, in doing so, be equally sure to have empathy and understanding for the amount of distress facing an anxiety-provoking situation causes.

DO Focus on competency: Support your child by reiterating that they have the ability to successfully handle the situation. Keep the focus on the skills needed to manage the situation rather than on the anxiety.

DO Downplay physical feelings: Express compassion for your child's physical feelings, but remind them that anxiety is causing the sensation, that it will not last, and that it is not harmful.

DO Be realistic: When helping your child to face their anxiety keep the situation manageable in length and intensity, but with the understanding that each time your child tries it, they should push themselves to stay a little longer.

DO Connect with school: Connect with your child's teacher and school psychologist or counselor and let them know that your child is experiencing anxiety. Your child will benefit from support at school to face anxiety-provoking situations.

DON'T Excessively reassure: Reassurance is a natural (and very common) parental response to children's distress. While it might help to relieve your child's anxiety a little in the short term, the more reassurance you give, the more reassurance your child will demand and require.

DON'T Be too involved or directive: When children are acutely anxious some parents will try to help by telling their child exactly what to do, how to behave, and what to say. In doing so you inadvertently create dependence and communicate to your child that they cannot handle the situation on their own. Be mindful to scaffold your support and increasingly step back and allow your child to navigate on their own.

DON'T Permit avoidance: Anxious children try to avoid many activities. As a parent or caregiver, it is difficult to continually push your child to face fears so at times you might give in and let your child avoid. If this occurs occasionally, it's understandable. However, be mindful not to let this become a habit. Although your child's anxiety and distress will drop in the short term and they will likely express gratitude for allowing them to avoid the activity, in the long-term avoidance only reinforces anxiety.

With help and support, many children will be able to face their fears and learn to master their anxiety. However, if fears persist or significantly disrupt daily life, it may be helpful to consult a psychologist or other mental health professional.

APA has a therapist locator to help you find a mental health professional near you.

This Article's Author

Donald Merriman, PhD, NCSP, is a licensed psychologist and certified school psychologist at Pequenakonck Elementary School in North Salem, New York. He is the founder and director of Merriman Psychological Services, a group private practice with offices in Pleasantville and Mahopac, New York. He specializes in treating children and adolescents with anxiety disorders.