Anxiety in Younger Kids: 11 Ways to Make a Difference

 Anxiety in very young kids, or all kids for that matter, is a pretty normal part of their development. They’re getting used to the world and making sense of their place in it. For about 1 in 4 kids though, anxiety can have a more intrusive impact on their lives.

For older kids, explaining what anxiety is and why it feels like it does will make a huge difference. [***See here for how***](http://www.heysigmund.com/anxiety-in-kids/). They can do pretty amazing things with the right information. For younger kids though, this can be a bit more difficult, particularly if their language is still developing. The good news is that there are plenty of things the grown-ups in their lives can do to help them through. The truth is there’s no-one better:

1. **Touch them.**

Humans were meant to be touched. It’s why we’re covered in skin and not spikes. If your little one is feeling anxious, touching them will initiate the release of neurochemicals that will start a relaxation response. Touching is one of the most healing things we humans can do.

1. **Ground them.**

Even better than touching them is holding them. Anxiety feels flighty. It feels insecure and turbulent. Help your little person feel grounded by holding them.

[Research](http://www.nature.com/srep/2013/131023/srep03034/full/srep03034.html) has found that hugging brings on a significant reduction in cortisol (the stress hormone). The huggable target doesn’t have to be human – just something huggable. (Though does it get much better than human?)

Let them feel you as a steadying presence. One of the symptoms of anxiety is clinginess. This isn’t surprising and actually, is another brilliant adaptive human trait. Young children might not be able to articulate it, but their body knows it needs to be grounded. If it’s what they need, give it. This won’t always be convenient, but if you can, let them fold into you. Stop cooking dinner, put down the phone and just for a couple of minutes, let them feel you keeping them safe. Make sure your own breath is steady so they don’t feel you as flighty. They’ll pick up whatever you send out.

We are one of the few cultures that don’t walk around holding our babies close to us. This is completely understandable of course – having a baby attached isn’t always practical (though I’ll never stop being amazed by what people can do with little ones attached!) but when they’re reaching out for a cuddle or clearly in need of one, it’s important to respond. They’re just doing what humans are wired to do – looking for connection.

Having said this, make sure that after a quick cuddle, you also encourage a brave response. You don’t want to inadvertently reinforce their anxiety by giving them something positive (a cuddle) every time they become anxious. Cuddle them, then encourage them to try something that will ultimately move them towards learning an effective response, even if it’s just holding steady and breathing.

1. **Softly now – it’s sleeping.**

This will help teach them the skills to calm themselves. First, find your child their very own soft toy pet. Make sure it’s an animal that’s fairly lifelike – a dog or a cat or something else that they would be happy to have against them. If you can get one that’s sleeping, all the better. At bedtime, tell them that the puppy/cat/whatever, let’s say, puppy, has fallen asleep too. Put it in against their tummy or nestle it in to the side of them and tell them that they have to try to keep the puppy asleep by breathing and moving very gently so as not to wake it up. This will focus them on their own body and develop their capacity to control their breathing – a valuable skill.

Breathing initiates the relaxation response, a process discovered by Harvard cardiologist Dr Herbert Benson. When triggered the relaxation response instantly sends out neurochemicals that neutralise the fight or flight response. The relaxation response will decrease blood pressure, lower heart rate, lower pulse rate, reduce the oxygen in the bloodstream and increase alpha brain waves, which are all associated with relaxation.

1. **Make sure their breathing is just right.**

In the midst of anxiety, breathing changes from slow and deep to short and shallow. This is one of the reasons for the physical symptoms of anxiety. Have your child practice breathing every day so that when he or she is in the midst of anxiety, it will be easier to call on effective breathing. Effective breathing comes from the belly, rather than the chest. Have your child practice their strong breathing by placing a soft toy on their tummy when they lie down. If the toy moves up and down, their breathing is perfect.

1. **Storytelling. 3 Ways.**

We love stories because we can relate – to the characters, the feelings, the situation. As well as being crazy good fun, stories can also be a powerful tool, particularly with kids. Let’s start with an example of a story and then we’ll talk about how you can use it. Make up a story about a child who has the same fear and shares other similarities with your child – maybe in relation to favourite foods, where they live, what they like.

Here are some bones to get you started. Fatten it out with detail however you like:

‘Once upon a time (because that’s how all the good stories start) there was a boy. When I say boy, I actually mean superhero. Superheros, you see, come in all shapes and sizes. This superhero was human shaped, kid sized. His name was Mitch and he loved the colour yellow.

During the day, Mitch did all the usual things that superheros did – he cleaned his teeth (because superheros need shiny choppers for shiny smiles, you know), captured baddies (that was usually over and done with by breakfast), washed hairy dogs, and cleaned his room.

He did this no trouble at all. He did most things no trouble at all but bedtime – sheesh! – bedtimes did cause a little bit of trouble. (Bedtimes can be like that.) Mitch struggled a little because he didn’t like the dark. Even superheros get a bit scared sometimes – of course they do – but what makes them superheros is that when they get scared, then they get brave.

Mitch needed a plan. He had a few ideas. He could sleep with a small light. Yes. That would work. He wouldn’t be scared of the dark if it wasn’t dark. He could be brave for ten minutes at a time, and then have 2 minutes with his mum or dad, or he could try special ways to relax so the dark didn’t matter.

This is just an example and as you can see, it doesn’t have to be a complicated story, just one they can relate to. Now for what to do with it:

• Using storytelling is a great way to understand more about the issue. Kids might find it easier to talk about feelings when they don’t have to own them directly. Stories facilitate this perfectly. Asking kids about the thoughts, feelings, intentions of a character can reveal a lot about where they’re at because their answers will be influenced by their own thoughts and feelings. For example, if you were telling the story above, ask your child what Mitch thinks might happen in the dark? What does Mitch need to feel better? What happened that made Mitch frightened of the dark? Some kids might find it easier to project their thoughts and feelings onto something else outside of themselves, rather than answer directly from their own point of view.

• Use the story to involve them in the process. If kids feel as though they have some control and input, they’re more like to stick to the strategy you put in place. In your story, include the different strategies you might use to ease the bedtime ritual, and ask your child to choose. ‘So, if you were Mitch, what would you do? … You’re a bit of a superhero, I think this could work for you. Let’s try it.’

• Use the story to help them find an anchor. An anchor is a word or phrase they can call on when they’re feeling anxious. Chances are, in the thick of an anxiety attack there will be no words, which is why it’s important to decide on the word or phrase beforehand and remind them of it when they need it. It might be as simple as ‘relax’, or ‘I’m okay’. Ask what would be a good thing for Mitch to hear when he gets scared.

1. **Mindfulness.**

This is an exercise that draws on the principles of mindfulness. If your child is worried, ask them where in their body they feel their worry might be living. Is it in their tummy? Their head? Arms? Legs? Chest? Ask them to gently put their hand on it, or they might prefer yours. Next, have them concentrate on their hand (or yours) and feel it comforting them. Remind them to breathe slowly in and out. As they breathe in, invite them to imagine the air going straight to their worry spot. Then, imagine that when they breathe out, the breath is taking some of worry out with it. Just enough to make them feel more comfortable with the feeling. It doesn’t matter if it doesn’t go completely. The idea is to make it manageable.

1. **The Stepladder.**

The idea of the stepladder approach is to gradually expose kids to the feared situation or object so they can get used to it gradually. Start with a mild version of whatever it is that causes your child to feel anxious. Expose them a few times until they can handle it (make it super easy to start with) then move on to something that is a little bit more anxiety inducing. Expose them a few times until they get used to it. Gradually expose the child to situations that progressively stir a little more anxiety than the one before it. It’s important that you don’t force them, but let them go at their own pace. You might need to stay on one stage for a while, and that’s okay. If you can, involve them in working out what the steps should be.

Here is an example for someone who is scared of dogs:

>> Start with a book about dogs. Spend some time looking at the pictures.  
>> Move to a fluffy toy dog. Touch it and hold it with them.  
>> Lot at dogs on television.  
>> Hold a friendly little dog and encourage them to look at it.  
>> Hold the little dog and encourage them to touch it.  
>> Let them hold the little dog.  
>> Encourage them to look at a big friendly dog.  
>> Encourage them to pat a big friendly dog.

1. **There are better places for worries than inside you.**

• Explain to your little person that there are better places for worries to be than inside them. Have them draw their worries and when they feel done, invite them to rip up the paper and throw it away. Whatever you do, don’t forget to explain that this is what you’ll be doing. You don’t want to be ripping up any precious masterpieces.

• Make a worry tree. The idea here is to create a something your child can use to externalise their worries, or to take their worries from a faceless force inside them, to one outside of themselves that they can visualise and contain. Invite them to draw or create a big tree. The simplest way to do this is to draw a big tree on a whiteboard (but be as fancy pants as you like or use a real one if you want). Then, cut out leaf shapes from paper or cardboard. When your child has a worry, ask them to draw it on the leaf. When they’ve done that pin it onto the tree. This will give them a sense that the worry is contained (by the edges of the leaf) and outside of themselves.

1. **Two halves of a whole.**

This is a powerful technique for kids who struggle with separation anxiety. Copy a photo of you and a photo of your child onto a piece of paper. Make sure the photos are touching. Then, cut the paper in half and fold it up – to keep it safe. Give them the photo of you and you take the photo of them. When they are away, the photo of them stays in your pocket and the photo of you stays in theirs. At night, the photo comes back together and stays on the fridge or their mirror, or wherever it can be visible. (You might need to print a few spares).

1. **Don’t encourage avoidance.**

The more your child avoids a situation, the harder it will be to face. Though you don’t want to push them too hard, don’t go out of your way to avoid the feared object. This could inadvertently reinforce the fear by communicating to them that it is scary and should be avoided. Praise any attempt they make to show brave behaviour.

1. **Avoid the labels.**

Avoid calling your child anxious or shy. It will become a part of their self-concept and they will behave in such a way as to reinforce the way you see them. Anxiety usually means that brave behaviour is coming. Even if it doesn’t come straight away, generally they’re working on it. Focus on their attempt to be ‘brave’, rather than their ‘anxious’ behaviour.

For kids with anxiety, parents and the people who love them are so important and can really make a difference. Decide on the strategies that seem to fit for your child and stay with those strategies. Don’t worry if they don’t work the first time, or the first few. Anxiety can be robust and persistent, but with you behind them, your little person can be even more so.