

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



Helping kids be brave

Anxious kids, like worriers and sensitive types, benefit from a parenting style that is empathetic but at the same time empowers them to tackle their fears.



Currently around 11% of children have problems coping with anxiety. Around 3% experience some form of depression.

As reported on the Kidspot website, Macquarie University psychology lecturer Dr Carolyn Schniering has stated that anxiety problems are the most common emotional disorders that children experience.

It's important to understand that anxiety is not something to be afraid of. As Dr Schniering says, "It's a normal emotion and an important part of how we engage with the world."

Experiencing some anxiousness in new social situations or some specific situations such as around water is quite normal and, in some regards, healthy. It's not healthy when anxiousness stops kids doing things they want or are able to do or interferes excessively with their school or pre-school experiences.

Genetics plays a part

Macquarie University research shows that children who display high levels of anxiety from a young age, and who have a parent who is excessively anxious or depressed, are seven to 11 times more likely to develop long-term anxiety.

This finding supports my experience that **anxious parents beget anxious kids**. But it's not that simple.

Some children are simply more prone to experiencing excessive anxiousness than others. These kids are typically classified as

worriers, shy types and more sensitive souls who wear their hearts on their sleeves. (I've parented one of these types and I learned first-hand that some situations they experienced needed to be handled with some parental care and attention!)

I want to stress that these children are not necessarily going to experience debilitating anxiety. However, they do benefit from a parenting style that is sympathetic while empowering them to tackle their fears.

It's worth noting that if you yourself are overly anxious or experiencing depression, **then self-care needs to be your first priority** before you can assist your kids.

When should I worry?

Dr Schniering says, "As a rule of thumb, parents should be more concerned if the fears or worries they experience become excessive and their child is unable to deal with every day life."

I would also add that when children become **overwhelmed** by their fears it may be time to seek professional help. A first port of call may be a General Practitioner or your child's school. (Our research shows that parents are more likely to seek help from their child's school than their GP; however, my experience has been that local doctors often have a good handle on these issues as well as knowledge of local providers.)

Helpful parenting practices

Before looking at helpful practises, let's quickly list some practices that are unhelpful for parenting anxious kids:

▶ Fixing kids' problems.

Jumping in too soon only increases anxiety and doesn't enable kids to build their capabilities.

▶ Allowing avoidance.

Letting kids escape new or fearful situations validates their fears.

▶ A 'get over it' attitude.

There's a difference between "You can do this!" and "For goodness sake, get over it!" The latter often comes from parent impatience and stress.



Okay, now for the helpful parenting practices for kids who are anxious. These include:

1. Skilling towards bravery. Help kids face their fears by skilling them, e.g. *Look around for a friendly face when you go to scouts.* You need to put on your coaching hat to build skills and self-confidence, which defeats anxiety.

2. Scaffolding towards bravery. Rather than avoidance allow kids to face their fears in stages, e.g. *Let's go to the party for an hour then I'll pick you up.* By breaking things down into smaller stages kids feel that they are more in control. Lack of control is behind a great deal of anxiousness in adults, as well as kids.

3. Be empathetic, not sympathetic. There is a difference. Empathy shows you understand how they feel; sympathy can be maudlin, leading you to pay excessive attention to the fear as well as letting them off the hook. Kids need a supportive adult who says, not necessarily in these words, "I know how you feel but I also know you can do this."

4. Creating opportunities for independence. Competency is the enemy of anxiety. Building children's self-help skills and their independence outside of the home has a snowball effect on how they feel about situations that they usually fear.

5. Model bravery. Okay, you knew I was going to mention this. But if you want kids to be brave **then you go first.** Your calmness, patience and willingness to methodically work your way through new situations will have a calming effect on kids. (Good leadership is basically about staying calm in stressful situations.) Modelling also shows them how fears of new and unknown social situations, and even specific fears such as going to the dentist, can be handled positively.

It's worth noting that most kids grow out of their anxiety given attentive brave parenting.

As a general parenting strategy I recommend that you take a strength-based approach (which is what I'm banging on about all the time) and focus on building children's strengths and assets to help them overcome fears. At the same time recognise that some children may need extra assistance from time to time as a result of their anxiety.

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