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Behaviour Support for Schools



## 8 Mistakes Most Parents Make Helping Kids With Anxiety (And How To Avoid Them)



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We hope that you find this guide to helping children manage their emotions is a valuable resource.

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# 8 Mistakes Most Parents Make Helping Kids With Anxiety (And How To Avoid Them)



## AVOID:

### 1. Giving excessive reassurance

When our children feel anxious, we want to do everything we can to reassure them. We want to make that anxious and uncomfortable feeling go away. But when we go overboard with reassurance this signals to the child that all this fuss must mean there really **must** be something to worry about.

That means too much reassurance can have the opposite effect to the one we're trying to achieve.

Instead, play it cool! Give some words of reassurance such as 'You've got this', or 'I know you can do it,' then stop talking and let those words sink in.

### 2. 'Rescuing' or taking the problem out of their hands

Most parents would do ANYTHING to stop their child feeling anxious. Our natural instinct is to make the hurt go away. But be careful.

When we rescue our children by removing obstacles or fixing a problem for them, we're actually robbing them of the opportunity to do it for themselves - to learn and grow. Yes, it might be hard, and of course we will be there to support them when they **really** need it...

But children need to experience difficult things and enjoy the sensation of achievement that comes with success. This also teaches our kids they have the skills to cope with future problems. Once you've done something - even once - it's in you! You can do it again!

On the other hand, if you never get the chance to try and overcome a difficulty, you don't feel equipped to try in the future. As parents, when we rescue our kids, we're actually (accidentally) communicating to them that we don't think they have the skills to cope - so we'd better swoop in and take the problem away from them.

This encourages children to feel helpless - and gives them the impression they always need someone else to fix things for them.

### 3. Swerving the problem

Swerving or avoiding the problem altogether is sometimes just... easier.

For example, if your child doesn't like going to swimming lessons, wouldn't it be so much easier every Tuesday at 4pm to just not go?! But if we do this - how will they learn the invaluable life-skill of being able to swim?

And how will they learn something equally valuable: they have the ability to do things that are difficult - and get through it? The more you avoid an issue, the bigger of a deal it becomes.

So take a deep breath and tackle it together - you can do it!

### 4. Threatening consequences

Sometimes as parents we meet a brick wall and we just don't know what to say or do next. We've all been there: we've tried encouraging, cajoling... bribing even! But nothing's working and we're not sure what to try next.

So we break out the consequences... 'If you don't go to swimming lessons, then there's no TV for a week.'

The trouble with consequences is:

- Once you've said it you **have** to follow through (it's going to be a very long week with no TV)
- Our child might prefer the consequence to the thing that's worrying them

So this strategy often backfires. Our child would rather lose the TV for a week than go swimming and face the scary thing. So they say, 'Okay then, I'll take no TV as long as I don't have to go swimming.' And now we are back in an avoiding situation (see above).

## **5. Giving too much time and attention to negatives**

Sometimes when **we** feel anxious about a situation, we talk about it a lot and give it lots of attention. Children see, hear and feel this. They focus on wherever the adult shines their 'spotlight of attention'.

And wherever we shine our spotlight, this is what will grow.

So be careful. Don't keep bringing up the issue with the child or asking them if they're okay. They may not even have been thinking about the issue before - but now they are. Watch what you say on the phone and to other adults in person – remember, children see and hear everything that goes on around them.

Children who feel anxious are often 'hyper-vigilant'. That means they're alert and watchful, looking out for danger.

So we need to make sure they don't hear us talking about the fearful situation too much, as this confirms to them there must be something to focus on and worry about... because that's exactly what the adult is doing.

## **6. Our words and body language don't 'say' the same thing**

Of course, you wouldn't completely ignore the stressful issue that's causing your child upset. There's going to be times when you do need to talk about it and offer some reassurance.

So it's important that:

- What you say
- The way you say it
- And the way you hold your body...

... all match up and give the same message.

Reassuring words delivered in a stressed tone and with tense body language can be confusing and scary for children. And again, we'll be reinforcing (accidentally) that there really is something to be anxious about.

## 7. Praising them for being brave

This is an easy trap to fall into.

When we talk about 'being brave,' we're automatically sending the message there **is** something very frightening to overcome – which then feeds our child's anxiety.

This is the opposite of what we are trying to achieve and is not reassuring.

## 8. Using a lucky charm or comfort item

Imagine the situation... your 6-year-old is having trouble getting to sleep at night because they're scared of the monsters in their bedroom.

Many parents want to offer comfort and reassurance to their child, so they provide a prop - an item that will help them get to sleep. Maybe it's a teddy bear or a special pillow.

In itself, this is not a terrible idea; however, there are two reasons why this often backfires:

- The child becomes over reliant on the comfort item. They start to believe there's no way they can get to sleep by themselves **without** their teddy. So when the teddy isn't available (because it's in the wash, or can't be found, or hasn't been packed in the suitcase!) they panic... and actually feel more anxious about the monsters.
- The child credits success to the charm or comforter, rather than to their own coping skills. They don't believe that they've grown and developed the skill for themselves, so they won't feel confident transferring that skill to new challenges (such as going into the bathroom at school).

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