

## How to Help My Anxious Child

Leanne Matlow

Current research from the Canadian Mental Health Association (CAMH.ca) and Children's Mental Health Ontario (kidsmentalhealth.ca) indicates that anxiety affects one in six children and of those children, only one is receiving treatment. What is even more disturbing is that the incidence is expected to increase by 2020.

According to further findings published in *Professionally Speaking*, the magazine of the Ontario College of Teachers (December, 2010), in any given classroom of thirty-two students, four are at high risk of performing poorly in school, missing out on important social experiences, and possibly engaging in substance abuse. It is important to identify who these kids are so that they can be helped to navigate the pitfalls that come with avoidance and other poor coping skills.

All children—and for that matter most adults—will have situations or periods of time that are filled with stress and worry. It is at these times that both children and adults often have disturbed sleep patterns or reports of ill health. These experiences are normal and part of child development. There is a difference between worry and anxiety. A person can be stressed, worried, or fearful when faced with real danger. This is a natural and normative response. Anxiety is different. An anxious child is one who is hypersensitive or “on alert” for danger most of the time and that heightened sense of “this is not safe” or “something bad is going to happen” prevents them from participating in age appropriate activities. Thus what is happening inside the mind of the child is that he or she perceives the situation as dangerous or scary when it is not. If a child repeatedly (ongoing, for more than a month) avoids a certain activity or situation, parents should consider seeking professional assistance to determine if the child is suffering from an anxiety disorder.

It is important to remember that there is no blame or fault in having an anxious child. Years of research have been compiled and there is evidence that proves that genetics are only one factor that gives rise to anxiety. Life experiences, temperament and environmental factors

can often explain why two children born to the same parents can live in the same house, yet only one of them develops an anxiety disorder.

Parents can help their children overcome the strain that anxiety can place on the child physically, mentally, and socially by doing a variety of things:

1. Learn about anxiety and specifically the type of anxiety disorder that your child suffers from. Knowledge is power and the more you understand about how your child thinks, the better able you will be to empathize with them and more importantly, help them to conquer their anxious thoughts.
2. Children need to develop an emotional vocabulary and learn not only to recognize their feelings but also the feelings of others. When children are given the opportunity to openly discuss their concerns, they are often relieved to know that they are not alone in their thinking. Through the use of techniques such as rehearsing “stressful” situations, practicing conversation starters, and breaking daunting tasks into smaller pieces, children often feel reassured and empowered.
3. No parent likes to see their child suffer in any way but what often happens is a parent swoops in and “saves” the child and thus actually causes a bigger problem. As a result, the child never gets to prove to himself that he can problem solve or handle a situation without parental intervention. Parents can be helpful when they ask the child to think of potential problematic situations before they occur and develop possible solutions. By teaching problem solving skills, parents can promote the growth of a positive self-image in their children. By over-reassuring, giving all the answers, and encouraging or enabling avoidance behaviors, parents are actually reinforcing the anxiety.
4. Be a positive role model. Teach, model, and practice relaxation techniques, a proper diet, and regular exercise. Try to appropriately express your feelings.
5. Remember to applaud any effort made to do something that was

once too “scary” and focus on even the mini-steps toward success. No one enjoys feeling anxious, especially a child.

The good news is that there is help and there is hope. Awareness, early diagnosis, and proper intervention can help propel an anxious child into a lifetime of success.

### **About The Author**

Leanne Matlow, BA, OTC, MA, is a counselor who holds a certificate in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. She is a Professional Colleague of the Academy of Cognitive Therapy. She is the author of the book, *Thinking About Thoughts*, a child-friendly resource to help children who suffer from anxiety.