

ANXIETY & YOUR UNDER 5 YEAR OLD...



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- How can I help my 0-5 year old manage their anxiety?
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WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a normal human response to threatening or fearful situations. Everybody will feel anxious at some point in their lives. Anxiety disorders occur when the symptoms of anxiety become chronic, or persist longer than they should. In anxiety disorders, the anxiety can severely interfere with a person's life. Some common characteristics of anxiety disorders include:

- Anxiety that feels as though it is out of control
- Avoidance of certain people or situations that may worsen the anxiety
- The feeling that the anxiety is overly intense or long-lasting
- Negative effects on health and relationships



WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY?

There is no definitive answer as to what causes anxiety disorders. However, there are some things which are thought to influence the likelihood of a person developing an anxiety disorder. These include:

- Personality - some people are simply more prone to worrying than others
- Negative experiences - our experiences impact the way we see the world, a negative experience such as a dog bite or near-drowning can significantly increase anxiety levels when faced with similar situations
- Proximity - the chances of experiencing anxiety are thought to increase when those around us are also anxious
- Trauma
- Genetics

HOW WILL I KNOW IF MY CHILD IS EXPERIENCING ANXIETY?

Anxiety is different for everyone. However, there are some common physical and behavioural changes that can help you to identify that a child might be experiencing anxiety.

Physical symptoms include:

- Sweating
- Heart racing
- Describing the feeling of butterflies in the stomach
- Muscle tension or trouble sitting still
- Shaking
- Dizziness
- Nausea or stomach ache
- Headaches

Behavioural changes include:

- Avoiding friends or family members
- Avoiding certain situations or places e.g. daycare/school
- Being overly self-conscious and eager to please others
- Being irritable and/or disruptive
- Consistently becoming upset when separating from a parent or guardian
- Fatigue and trouble sleeping
- Refusing to speak (mutism)



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WAYS TO HELP EASE ANXIETY IN UNDER 5'S

- Talk about it. With older children (3-5 years) helping them to verbalise their feelings can be an important first step to helping them overcome their fears. Avoid leading questions or making statements that reinforce the anxious feelings
- Show support, but don't allow the child to avoid the anxiety triggering stimuli. Let them know you are there for them and offer lots of praise and encouragement to the child for facing their fears
- Distraction. Bubbles are an excellent distraction technique, particularly for under two's. Using bubbles can help distract the child from the feared stimuli without allowing the child to avoid their fear altogether. This can be particularly useful for things such as doctors or dentist appointments
- Stress balls. Fidgeting with a stress ball has been shown to be an effective form of stress release for young children. These can either be store bought, or handmade (see instructions below)
- Breathing techniques. Deep breathing techniques help to slow the heartbeat and reduce symptoms of anxiety. See below for an example - The flower technique.



THE FLOWER TECHNIQUE

The flower technique is a simple breathing exercise which helps children to master deep breathing, by having them pretend they are holding a flower.

First, have the child position their hands as though they are holding an imaginary flower in front of their face. Next, instruct the child to breathe in through their nose for a count of four and 'sniff the flower' which will cause them to take a deep nasal breath filling the lungs and belly.

To get the child to exhale, instruct them to 'blow the petals' which will cause the child to exhale deeply and slowly from their mouth, deflating the lungs and belly and supporting the release of anxiety.

Continue the exercise several times until the child is calm.

DIY SENSORY OR STRESS BALLS

YOU WILL NEED:

- 2 balloons per ball
- 1 cup of flour, rice, or playdough to fill
- 1 funnel
- marker pens (optional for decorating)

INSTRUCTIONS:

- First, blow up the balloon (do not tie) then allow to deflate to stretch the balloon enough to fill
- Secure the end of the balloon over your funnel
- Carefully pour the selected filling into the funnel and shake gently to allow the filling to fall into the balloon. Fill until the balloon has reached the desired size
- Remove the funnel and tie off the end of the balloon, as close to the filling as possible.
- Cut the neck off a second balloon and stretch around the stress ball. This will help to avoid mess.
- Decorate with a smily face or as you choose!

Please note that balloons do degrade over time, so it is recommended to replace your stress ball every few months, sooner if used regularly, to avoid tearing.

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