

How can I help my child with worries?

SickKids Centre for Community Mental Health has worked with lots of families whose kids struggle with worries. Many families who have worked with staff at SickKids CCMH have found these suggestions helpful. Keep in mind your child's age and abilities when applying these strategies. Give them a try and feel free to add your own!

Reflect on your own feelings. The key to helping your child regulate their emotions is to regulate your own emotions. To understand your child better, it is important to understand yourself. Everyone is more comfortable with some emotions than others. Try asking yourself:

- Which emotions do I have most difficulty dealing with in my child?
- How do I model handling difficult emotions for my child?
- What is triggered in me by my child's emotion? Am I acknowledging these feelings, or do I sweep them away? Check out this link for an animated example <https://bit.ly/2CkyLfU>



Help them recognize their worries. One of the most important things to do when your child has worries is to help them recognize them.

- Help your child learn to recognize how their body feels when they're anxious. Does their heart feel like it's beating too fast or do they feel hot or dizzy? Soon they'll have a better idea of what their anxious body feels like.
- Help your child learn to recognize worry talk. Help them ask themselves questions like "What do I imagine will happen? What bad thing do I think will happen?" When they can identify and analyze their worry talk, they'll be better able to try to change it.
- Help your child make a list of what specifically worries them. Do they get worried about speaking in class because they might forget what to say? Or do they fear going for a sleepover because you won't be there to tuck them in? When they know what worries them you can help them make a plan to cope with the worry.

Help your child express themselves. Helping your child learn to express themselves can help them manage their worries. Try these strategies to help your child talk about their worries to help tame them.

- Listen to your child talk about their worries. Let your child know that you understand that they're stressed, even if the worry doesn't make sense to you. Acknowledge that their worried feelings are real, and you want to help.
- Help your child to name their worries. This can help your child separate themselves from their worries to talk back to them or reduce them.

Teach relaxation techniques. Even when you and your child use helpful strategies, some worries can still bother them. Try some of these tips to help your child relax when the worries come around.

- Try some breathing techniques to help your child calm their body. Counting breaths or concentrating on breathing into their belly can help your child focus their mind and calm their nervous system.
- It can be hard for your child to relax their mind when their body is feeling stressed. It might help to focus on relaxing each muscle group by itself (toes, then legs, torso, arms and head). Lead them in this activity by following the script at <https://bit.ly/2MCmOXF>.
- Your child might need some extra quiet time to help them unwind and detach from their worries. Make sure they have a safe, quiet space where they can relax (continued, over).

- When your child can't find a physically quiet space, you can help them relax by visualizing a place where they feel safe (e.g. a day at the park, their bedroom, playing with their pets). Use all five senses to create a soothing environment in their mind.

Teach coping strategies. Helping your child learn coping strategies will empower them to manage their worries.

- Help your child challenge their worries with logic. If they're worried about something bad happening, help them make a list of the proof or likelihood that it could happen. Just because it's possible doesn't mean that it's probable!
- Plan ahead! Help your child make a plan for a worry they're about to encounter. If your child is worried or overwhelmed about a big test, help them make a plan by breaking the work up into smaller steps to make it less overwhelming, and a plan to keep calm when they write the test.
- Help your child manage their worries more independently. If your child often comes to you for reassurance about their worries it can help them feel temporarily safe but it's not a permanent solution. Encourage your child to face their worries head on while letting them know that you believe in them and that you'll be there to help. For example, if your child is worried about a sleepover party, have a plan that involves several anxiety reducing steps (e.g., breathing exercises, bringing a comforting item from home, talking to a caregiver over the phone) before immediately telling them that they don't need to go.
- Help your child draw a "worry safe." Encourage your child to be as creative as possible and imagine that all their big worries are held tightly in the worry safe and can't hurt them. Then have scheduled worry time. Have a designated period to talk about worries (try after dinner or at the end of the week depending on your child's needs). When it's not worry time, write the worries down for later and keep them in the safe.

Create a healthy environment. Your child's environment can be a powerful tool to reduce worry. Try out these tips to make your child's environment as healthy as it can be.

- Point out and reward your child when they face their worries. Make sure you let your child know how impressed you are when they use a positive coping strategy!
- Try to keep a consistent routine. Not knowing what's coming can be a big source of worry for all children, especially those who are sensitive to their environments. Keeping things as predictable as possible will reduce unnecessary worries and anticipation of the unknown. You can also anticipate the unexpected with your child by having coping strategies ready for when things don't go according to plans.
- Keep a healthy diet and exercise. Having a healthy body helps your child to best handle challenging or worrying situations.

Further resources

Check out these links for more helpful hints on how to manage worries

1. Anxiety BC <https://www.anxietybc.com/>
2. CHEO: Helping Kids Cope with Fear and Anxiety <http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/anxiety?mid>

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