

# How to Help Kids with Anxiety: 6 Ways to Help Children Relax

Few things are harder for a parent than seeing a child worry. While all kids worry from time to time, constant anxiety can be cause for concern. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), [1 in 8 children](#) has an anxiety disorder. When anxiety in kids is untreated, it can lead to poor school performance, substance abuse and missed social experiences.

If your child struggles with anxiety, you want to do everything you can to help. Here are the major causes of anxiety in kids, along with products and techniques that may help your teen or little one feel calmer and less stressed.

## What Causes Anxiety in Kids?

As the ADAA states, an anxiety disorder is more than just an occasional worry or bout of stress. All children feel the worry monster creep in from time to time. They might stress about school or arguments with friends. They might feel anxiety about their grades or whether people at school will like them. In younger kids, worries can take the form of [separation anxiety](#) or not fitting in at school.

But an [anxiety disorder](#) is altogether different. When children have an anxiety disorder, they worry about things that are unlikely to happen. Instead of normal, everyday worries, their anxiety finds its way into just about every area of their lives. They might even feel a sense of doom — a “prolonged, intense anxiety that is out of proportion to the present situation and affects a person’s daily life and happiness.”

As an [example from the Child Mind Institute](#) states: “A boy might feel nervous about talking to the girls in his class. Someone with social anxiety disorder might avoid ordering in a restaurant because he’s afraid of humiliating himself.”

As anyone can see, this is an unpleasant way to live. When it’s your child struggling with anxiety, it’s difficult and even scary to think of someone so young dealing with overwhelming feelings of stress and worry.

Because an anxiety disorder is different from anxiety, it’s not exactly easy to pin down what causes it. According to the ADAA, health experts believe that anxiety disorders are similar to other chronic health conditions in that they’re brought on by a [combination of genetics and environmental factors](#). As with asthma, for example, a child might inherit allergies from his parents and then encounter environmental factors that exacerbate respiratory health.

Similar to asthma, a child with an anxiety disorder might have parents or other relatives with the same condition. When the child encounters stressful situations — bullying, a cross-country move or a parents’ divorce — the anxiety disorder can manifest.

# Symptoms of Anxiety Disorders in Kids

As with adults, kids can experience a range of anxiety disorders. Some children have [generalized anxiety disorder](#), which is persistent and excessive worry about many different things. Other kids have [social anxiety disorder](#), which makes them worry excessively in social settings like school, parties or sports practice.

Children and teens can also experience post-traumatic stress disorder, phobias, panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. These are all forms of anxiety disorder that can have a devastating impact on kids' lives.

As with most health conditions, anxiety disorder often affects different people in different ways. However, the ADAA says some of the most common symptoms include:

- Problems relating to peers
- Irritability and moodiness
- Fatigue and insomnia
- Problems concentrating
- Restlessness
- Bad grades and poor school performance
- Difficulty being on time, always running late

It's also common for kids and teens with anxiety disorders to be incredibly hard on themselves. Teachers, coaches and parents might initially perceive these kids as being "perfectionists" or "overachievers," when really they are deeply insecure about their abilities and self-worth.

## 6 Tips: How to Help Kids with Anxiety

Here's a scenario that may sound familiar. You drop your child off at daycare or school, and she's suddenly terrified to go in the building. She's gone inside every day with no problem for the past three weeks, but suddenly she's clinging to your leg, refusing to budge another inch.

You start with reassurance. *It's your school. All your friends are inside. You've done this before.* But, nope — nothing is working. She's practically clinging to your car door, begging to go home. Now you're in danger of being late for work. Exasperated, you switch to threats. *If you don't go inside school right this minute, you're losing thirty minutes of cartoon time.*

Eventually (and maybe with a lot of tears and frustration), your child goes inside. You drive to work, feeling miserable and guilty.

For many parents of kids with an anxiety disorder, this is an all-too-familiar example. These scenarios can appear out of nowhere, leading to meltdowns, arguments and frustrated moms and dads.

If your child has an anxiety disorder, there are many strategies you can use to ease the worry and help your child conquer their anxiety. It may take some practice, but many parents find that helping their teen or little one work through their anxieties is a rewarding experience that improves their relationship with their child.

Many parents even say that helping their child overcome their anxiety helped them, too. After all, [40 million adults](#) in the U.S. have an anxiety disorder, and there's a strong genetic component to anxiety disorders.

## 1. Personify the Worry — then Defeat It

For young kids especially, it's often helpful to encourage them to imagine their worries as an actual creature or cartoon character. [Psychologist Dan Peters](#) calls it the Worry Monster.

Your child's Worry Monster shouldn't be scary. On the contrary, you can help your child envision a goofy, silly or funny monster that resembles a character from their favorite movie or TV show. By personifying the Worry Monster, you give your child a definitive target or adversary. Instead of abstract worries, they have something they can picture in their minds. Imagining the Worry Monster as a silly or funny creature can also help kids feel like they have power over their obsessive or unhelpful thoughts.

Peters compares the Worry Monster to the “man behind the curtain” in the Wizard of Oz. In the movie, Dorothy and her friends are initially scared of Oz the Great and Powerful. When they pull back the curtain, however, they see he's just an ordinary man — and something of a bully. The Worry Monster talks a big game, but in the end he's nothing more than a trickster.

## 2. Set Aside “Worry Time”

As the parent of a child with anxiety disorder, you may have found yourself telling your child “don't worry” or “stop worrying.” However, mental health experts say this doesn't really work. You can't just turn off worry or stop it from happening. That doesn't work for adults, and it won't work for kids, either.

What you can do, however, is acknowledge your child's worries and help them create a designated “worry time.” While this may sound counterintuitive, research shows that [setting up worry time works](#).

Researchers have found that people who set aside 30-minute “worry time” periods each day end up shifting the emotions associated with their worst fears. For example, if someone is afraid of flying, they would spend 30 minutes each day worrying about all the bad things they fear about flying. During this time, they should avoid thinking of anything positive or trying to rationalize their way out of their fears. If they run out of fears in the 30-minute period, they should simply recycle their fears and keep focusing on the negative.

After doing this a few times, most people gradually shift from a heightened state of fear and panic to boredom. Their brain becomes exhausted from the repeated “fight or flight” response and chooses to move on. In time, the boredom usually shifts to more positive feelings.

If your child is very young, you might consider scaling back worry time to five or 10 minutes. You can also talk through worry time together by discussing what makes your child afraid and why. Some parents also encourage their child to write down their fears on a dry erase board or inside a notebook.

### **3. Accept That (Some) Worry Is Useful**

Not all worry is bad. In fact, some worry is important for survival. Humans have evolved to feel concern about things that could hurt us. For example, if we get a fever and a sore throat, we might worry that we have the flu and see a doctor to get treatment that helps us avoid getting seriously sick.

Worry can also be a [powerful motivator](#) and a source of protection. When children go play outside, their parents worry about possible sun damage and remember to apply sunscreen. Likewise, when people get in the car, they worry about getting in a car accident, which can prompt them to put on their seat belt.

Parents can help their kids differentiate between the “good” worry and the worry that gets out of control. To go back to the driving example, good worry reminds you to wear your seat belt, whereas unhelpful worry might stop you from driving altogether.

### **4. Create a Relaxation Kit**

What do you like to do when you’re stressed? For some people, de-stressing means taking a long bubble bath or snuggling up with a good book. Others enjoy a leisurely jog on a nature trail or just hanging out with their dog in the local dog park.

For kids, it often helps to be a little more structured. You can create a “relaxation kit” filled with toys, activities or items that help your child refocus and calm down. [Ideas for a go-to relaxation kit](#) include filling a box with coloring books, a few fidget toys, a favorite plush animal or even kinetic sand or clay.

At SensaCalm, one of our parent favorites are our [Peaceful Pals](#), which are weighted plush toys that come in both cuddle fabric and waterproof fabric. Designed to be as cuddly and cute as any regular plushie, Peaceful Pals come in both three- and five-pound weights. The weight inside provides a form of anxiety therapy called deep pressure touch stimulation, which mimics a firm but gentle massage or hug.

## 5. Face Their Fears

When you have an anxiety disorder, it's a natural instinct to avoid your fears. If you have social anxiety, you might make up excuses to get out of weddings, work meetings or family gatherings. Do this too often and you can easily find yourself unable to comfortably interact in any social setting.

The same is true for kids, who might avoid socializing with other children on the playground or participating in sports or clubs at school. Dr. Jerry Bubrick, a senior clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, [says that exposure therapy](#) can help kids handle the “bully in the brain” by slowly acclimating them to their fears.

Like the name suggests, exposure therapy works by gently introducing a child's fears over a period of time. For a child terrified of separating from a parent, this might start with having the parent leave the room for a few moments at a time. The goal is to slowly and gently build up to longer separations, until the child's fears diminish and she feels like she has mastered her anxiety.

## 6. Improve Sleep Hygiene with a Weighted Blanket

Anxiety disorders and sleep troubles often go hand in hand. In fact, the [ADAA identifies insomnia and poor sleep](#) as one of the most common side effects of anxiety. According to the National Sleep Foundation, even missing as little as [30 or 60 minutes of sleep](#) a night can have an impact on kids.

For kids with anxiety disorders, missed sleep can also make anxiety worse. One way to fight back is by improving sleep hygiene. While this may sound like washing your hands or using a good shampoo, it actually means creating an environment that's conducive to healthy, restful sleep.

Besides ensuring your child gets enough rest, you can also take steps to make sure their rest is peaceful and soothing. [Research has shown](#) that weighted blankets help reduce the physiological hallmarks of anxiety by lowering blood pressure, improving pulse oximetry and regulating pulse rate. In studies, 78 percent of participants also preferred a weighted blanket as a “calming modality.”

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