

Change. The very word induces fear and panic. Some of us deal better with change than others, but human nature is wary of change. If we, as adults, do not like change, what must be going through the minds of children when change occurs?

Perhaps it isn't change that scares us, but the fear of the unknown. Unfortunately, regarding the school setting and its place in your child's life, we currently have no absolute answers about next days, weeks, or even months. Frankly, students, teachers, and administrators are experiencing not only everyday stress, but some stages of grief; there is loss and uncertainty about when we will reconvene.

So how can we help each other through these days? How can we help our children that are too young to understand terms and facts that adults are having difficulty understanding? There are no precise answers. There is no 'lived experience' with which to compare to the current scenarios.

When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning adults can fall into a negative cycle and, not wanting a child to suffer, actually exacerbate the youngster's anxiety. It happens when adults, anticipating a child's fears, try to protect her from them. Here are pointers for helping children escape the cycle of anxiety. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it. It happens when parents, anticipating a child's fears, try to protect her from them.

None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety isn't to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It's to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they're anxious. And as a byproduct of that, the anxiety will decrease or fall away over time.

1. Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious.

Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset, starts to cry—not to be manipulative, but just because that's how she feels—and her parents whisk her out of there, or remove the thing she's afraid of, she's learned that coping mechanism, and that cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

2. Express positive—but realistic—expectations.

You can't promise a child that his fears are unrealistic—that he won't miss his friends. But you can express confidence that he's going to be okay, he will be able to manage it, and that, as he faces his fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives him confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you're not going to ask him to do something he can't handle.

3. Respect their feelings, but don't empower them.

It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. So if a child is terrified about going to the doctor because she's due for a shot, you don't want to belittle her fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. You want to listen and be

empathetic, help her understand what she's anxious about, and encourage her to feel that she can face her fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

4. Don't ask leading questions.

Encourage your child to talk about his feelings, but try not to ask leading questions like "Are you anxious about missing school? Are you worried about your friends and teachers?" To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: "How are you feeling about things today?"

5. Don't reinforce the child's fears.

What you don't want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: "Maybe this is something that you should be afraid of." Let's say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time she's around a dog, you might be anxious about how she will respond, and you might unintentionally send a message that she should, indeed, be worried.

6. Encourage the child to tolerate anxiety.

Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what he wants or needs to do. It's really encouraging him to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the "habituation curve"—it will drop over time as he continues to have contact with the stressor. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that's how we get over our fears.

7. Think things through with the child.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true—how would she handle it? A child who's anxious about separating from her parents might worry about what would happen if they didn't come to pick her up. So we talk about that. If your mom doesn't come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? "Well I would tell the coach my mom's not here." And what do you think the coach would do? "Well he would call my mom. Or he would wait with me." A child who's afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick her up can have a code word from her parents that anyone they sent would know. For some kids, having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

8. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

There are multiple ways you can help kids handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Kids are perceptive, and they're going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you can't handle the stress or the anxiety. I'm not saying to pretend that you don't have stress and anxiety, but let kids hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.