

Dealing with School Anxiety: Powerful Things That Adults Can Do

By Karen Young



School Anxiety: Powerful Things That Adults Can Do

Anxious kids are brave kids. They are creative, thoughtful and have the potential to light the world on fire, every one of them, often in unexpected ways. When anxiety takes hold though, it's overwhelming. It can shut down their potential, their engagement with the world and their self-belief. It feels awful and life becomes more about avoiding anxiety than it does about embracing life in ways that flourish them. This can be turned around and although anxiety doesn't generally go away, it can be managed so that it stays in the background and out of their way. For anxious kids, the important adults in their lives are a powerful ally in helping to make this happen.

1. Let nothing be off-limits.

Let them know that they can come to you with anything. They don't have to know how to start or how to say it. Let them know that it's enough to let you know that they have something they want to talk to about, but that they don't know what to say. The next part you can do together.

Let them know you can handle anything.

They'll catch whatever you send out, so let it be peaceful, beautiful zen vibes, even if you have to fake it. Let them know that there is nothing they can say that will make you sad, angry or disappointed in them. You might feel all of these things, but hang on to them. If they're opening up to you, it's because they trust you and want to bring you in to their world, which is a pretty special place to be. Keep the connection and take the opportunity to show them that coming to you, however hard it is, will always be worth it. You can't imagine how grateful you might be for this one day.

2. Set a time to chat – with a definite beginning and a definite end.

Have a regular talk time with a definite beginning and a definite end where they can stop the conversation if they want with no pressure from you to keep it going. Let them have the control. Sometimes it can be difficult to raise things because of where it might end up – too much digging, too many questions, too much intensity, phone calls to the school – who could know. Sometimes kids need the opportunity to say what they need to say, even if it's just downloading about a crappy day, and know that they can stop the conversation whenever they want to. It's a safe way to raise difficult things. It can feel uncomfortable until your next opportunity to chat – which will come – but what's important is that they've been able to bring you in to whatever is troubling them. If it needs to go further, you can deal with that later, but at least you'll have the 'heads up' that something is going on.

3. Don't judge, criticise or push them too hard to move through it.

What they are doing might not be working for them, but for the moment it's the only thing they know how to do. Be the one who 'gets it' from where they are. Don't worry, you won't reinforce their anxiety by doing this. What you'll be doing is validating them. When they feel validated, they can start to respond from a position of strength. Criticising them, judging them, or demanding a different response will only intensify their feelings of self-doubt and put a distance between you.

4. They need to know you get it.

Telling them there's nothing to worry about will only make things tougher for everyone. The more you fight their feelings, the harder their feelings will fight back. Be with them where they are, rather than pushing them to be somewhere else. When they are anxious, they are being driven by a brain in fight or flight. It's working towards survival and has no time for rational thought. The rational, thinking part of their brain 'disconnects' from the instinctive, reactive part. You can play a powerful part in turning this around. Stay calm and gently tell them that you can see that they're struggling and that you understand. Tell them that you know how difficult it is for them and that you wish it could be different. Then, give them in fantasy what they can't have in reality. 'I really wish that going to school was easier for you. I can see how much it upsets you. I really understand how awful it feels and I wish you didn't have to go, but you do.' Take away any their reason to fight you or withdraw (flee) from you. This will help settle the reactive part of their brain and

bring the rational part back online. When this happens, they'll find calm and will be able to make better decisions.

5. Help them with the words for what they might be feeling.

Anything you can do to flourish their emotional vocabulary will help them to make sense of things. Name what you think they might be feeling in a way that makes it easy for them to correct you. 'You seem angry/ confused/ sad, right now.' Then let them know that it's okay for them to feel what they're feeling, and that you understand. Let them know they make sense to you. It's a beautiful thing to feel.

6. Anxiety and courage exist together. Show them.

It can be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that brave people do what they do because they are fearless, but anyone who is pushed to the edges of themselves will feel fear. Explain that anxiety is actually a sign that they're about to do something really brave – otherwise they wouldn't be anxious about it. What pushes the limits is different for everyone. There will be things that are tough for them that are easy for others, and things that are easy for them (find the things they're good at) and tough for others. Everyone feels anxiety at some point, but for kids going through it, they can feel like they are the only ones. Model self-belief and normalise anxiety by sharing the times you feel anxious and act brave.

7. Get the information you need when they're calm.

When things are calm and happy, have a chat about what you can do to make things better when their anxiety is at full throttle. Ask them what helps and what you (or others) do that doesn't help. Listen and try not to take it personally.

8. Notice every little step.

Kids who struggle with school anxiety are generally really well-behaved and want to do the right thing. Your approval means everything to them. When they do something that would be difficult in the face of anxiety, notice – even if it's just finishing breakfast or putting their hair in ponytail. Their anxiety feels big. Whenever they're bigger, let them know that you've noticed.

9. Understand why being tough won't help.

It's likely that you've tried the tough love thing, even if only in desperation. It's also likely that it didn't work. Anxiety is driven by a brain that thinks it's under threat. It's physiological. Their body is being surged with neurochemicals that are readying them for fight or flight. When there's no need for fight or flight, the neurochemicals build up and it feels awful. That's anxiety. It's not bad behaviour and it's not from soft parenting. Kids with anxiety just want to be like other kids who have no trouble going to school. They don't want to feel the way they do, so being tough or telling them to 'get over it' will be as useful as telling them to catch falling stars in a thimble. When the brain is in survival

mode, as it is during anxiety, it's in lockdown and completely focussed on staying alive. There's no human instinct that's stronger. The brain won't sideline its need to stay safe just because someone is getting cranky. All it will do is make your child feel more alone and less understood. It can be really easy to feel judged by people who suggest that toughening up is all that's needed. Ugh. Anyone who says that has never had to deal with a child in distress from anxiety. Ignore them and move on. Or tell them to shoosh. They have no idea what they're talking about. Trust that you're doing a great job, because you will be.

And finally ...

It's more than likely that the anxiety didn't happen overnight, so change won't happen that way either. Any progress is great progress. Anxiety is difficult to deal with, but it is manageable. There will be steps forward and steps back, but over time the forward steps will become more and the backward ones will become less. Don't underestimate the difference you're making by being there, believing in them, and seeing them for the amazing humans they are, not just despite their anxiety but also because of it.

Source: <http://www.heysigmund.com/school-anxiety-what-parents-can-do/>