

Anxiety is a normal part of life but explaining it to kids isn't easy. Here's a handy list for getting the basics down so as to foster a healthy and productive conversation with your children.

Anxiety is normal. Everyone experiences anxiety because uncertainty and scary threats are part of living.

Anxiety can be either adaptive or maladaptive. Anxiety centers in the brain detect real dangers (a screaming kid who was pushed off the slide) and false alarms (a yelp of glee on the slide). Anxiety is adaptive when it motivates kids to prepare for tests, make-up with friends after a squabble and practice for a performance. It's maladaptive when those false alarms create so much fear that kids refuse to go on field trips or participate in any activities.

Anxiety is temporary. Like gravity, anxiety goes up, and it always comes down. It can be extremely uncomfortable — and can even feel life-threatening — but it will resolve when the heart rate can come down to normal levels again.

High anxiety leads to avoidance. Due to the emotional discomfort associated with anxiety, children (like adults) have a natural motivation to avoid. Avoidance can become a bad habit, because it means kids miss opportunities to face their fears. And because avoidance leads to a drop in panicky heart rate, kids learn to associate avoidance with safety.

High anxiety drives kids to beg for rescue. Whether dread involves separation from parents, vaccinations, or new social activities, kids will go to any length to get the parent to allow an escape or avoidance of the dreaded experience (this parental behavior is called “symptom accommodation”).

High anxiety is contagious. Because emotions (especially between loved ones) are contagious, parents can be so affected by their children's anxiety — experiencing their own accelerated heart rates, panicky thoughts and amygdala hijacks — that they give in to their child's desire for escape.

High anxiety leads to excessive seeking of reassurance. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, constant reassurance does not work to allay anxiety; exasperated parents can end up impatient and rejecting, which then exacerbates the child's anxiety!

High anxiety does not abate with talk alone. Since extreme anxiety is experienced in the emotional brain regions, a parent's logical opinion about safety usually does not suffice. In fact, talking about how fun or benign school or dance class will be can lead to more anxiety (and arguments), not less.

Anxiety is best addressed with coping strategies. Children need to be exposed to circumstances that make them irrationally afraid in stepwise fashion, with calm and accepting parental support. With a variety of coping techniques, they need to learn through facing their fears that they are safe. Anxiety will attenuate only when they experience the ebb of their anxiety

in the presence of that threat (e.g. daycare, dance, field trips, solo sleeping, preschool, birthday parties).