

ANXIETY CONVERSATION GUIDE

...for parents of preschoolers

presented by @parentcue

It's very common for preschoolers to experience varying levels of anxiety. At this age, children are afraid of all kinds of things, but typically lack the cognitive skills to fear the abstract (failure, rejection, etc.), and instead worry about concrete things like dogs, noises, and the weather.

WHAT THEY'RE ANXIOUS ABOUT

Babies and toddlers generally fear separation; loud noises; sensory overload; "stranger danger" when new people are around; people in costumes. The most common fears for preschoolers ages 3-4 are fantasy characters like monsters and witches, the dark, and new noises.

Even young children can experience the physical symptoms that come with anxiety: tummy aches, a racing heart, or even trembling. They can also stomp their feet, bite other kids, or throw a temper tantrum in the middle of the grocery store.

Though their fears may not be founded in reality ("*There's a two-headed monster in my closet!*"), what they're feeling is reality for your concrete-thinking preschooler. But experiencing a certain amount of stress is important for your preschooler to experience in order to develop the coping skills necessary to manage anxiety in the future.

TIPS TO HELP THEM NAVIGATE

Here are some tips to help your preschooler confront their fears while still protecting their trust in and relationship with you.

1. Help your preschooler confront their fears . . . slowly.

Pushing your preschooler to face their fears is a good way to help them overcome them—but we have to be careful not to push them too hard or too fast. Help your child get used to experiencing the things that give them anxiety in small, measured doses.

If your child experiences separation anxiety, try having a sitter come to your house for a small increment of time. Maybe even stay in the house, but not in the same room. Show your child that parents do come back, even if he or she can't see them for a short period of time.

2. Explain things . . . but use words they can understand.

Instead of giving in to your child's fears or becoming frustrated, try explaining a potentially fearful situation prior to your child encountering it. Even if they can't understand everything you're saying, they will pick up on the soothing tone of your voice and see that you're not worried or afraid.

Say things like:

"I know the hand dryer is loud. That scares you a little, doesn't it? But did you know the hand dryer helps people keep their hands clean and dry? If you want to try it, you can. If not, maybe you can try it next time!"

"Mommy is going to have coffee with a friend. Miss Maria is going to come play with you. When Mommy is done having coffee, I'm going to come home and you can tell me everything you did while I was gone!"

3. Give them tools to fight their fears.

The next time your preschooler expresses a fear or worry, help them redirect or replace their thoughts. For example, if your child expresses concern about a monster in their closet, avoid any follow-up actions that reinforce monsters exist. Instead help them redirect their thoughts.

Say things like:

Close your eyes. Imagine something really fun, like your last birthday party.
What were your favorite things about it?
How does it make you feel after thinking happy thoughts? Better, right?
You can choose what you think about—choose things that are way more fun to think about than monsters!

4. **Make it personal.**

Our children are always watching us. They observe how we react in different situations—especially in situations where we're under a large amount of pressure and stress. It's important for you (as a parent *and* for your own well-being) to be intentional about caring for yourself when it comes to your own anxiety.

Make sure you have someone you can open up to honestly about your own fears and concerns. And, if necessary, consult the help of a ministry leader or professional.

5. **Widen the circle.**

Only you know your child, but if he or she exhibits more serious behaviors, then it may be time to reach out to a professional. Keep in mind that some children are more prone to anxiety than others. If your child's anxiety is preventing them from having an overall happy life, if they're unable to leave the house or play with other children, consult with your pediatrician or a licensed counselor.

Seeking professional help isn't a sign of failure as a parent. It makes you a good parent when you realize your child sometimes needs more than you are able to give.

ANXIETY CONVERSATION GUIDE

...for parents of elementary schoolers

presented by @parentcue

Whether it's bad weather, sleeping away from home, or test-taking, it's very common for elementary schoolers to experience varying levels of anxiety.

WHAT THEY'RE ANXIOUS ABOUT

Up until about eight years old, many causes of anxiety carry over from preschool—with a focus on specific, identifiable events like new situations, animals, the dark, loud noises, etc.

But as a child develops, the source of their anxiety becomes more abstract. As they grow more self-aware (beginning around second to third grade), their anxieties become more socially-influenced. They worry about friends, acceptance, the future, and new challenges at school.

Generally speaking, there are three types of fears kids this age experience¹: separation anxiety, social anxiety, and a specific phobia.

And just like adults, elementary-aged kids can experience the physical symptoms that come with anxiety. They can complain of stomachaches or headaches, a racing heart, or trouble sleeping.

TIPS TO HELP THEM NAVIGATE

When our kid's anxiety is heightened, it's common for us as parents to want to remove that discomfort. And while it's healthy for us to give our kids ways to cope, we shouldn't try to engineer a "worry-free" lifestyle for them. A moderate amount of stress and anxiety pushes kids to succeed at home and in school, as well as protects them from certain dangers.

So, how do you help your elementary schooler confront their fears and develop their own tools for managing anxiety?

1. **Give their anxiety a name.** Asking kids to name the source of their anxiety helps them to personalize and externalize their fears.

For younger elementary kids, ask:

Will you draw a picture of what's making them worried or upset?
Tell me about the picture. Is someone/something in the picture talking?
What are they/is it saying?

For older elementary kids, ask:

Will you name the worry floating around in your brain.
What is the worry telling you?
Is the worry telling you the truth?

2. **Practice exposure.** Avoiding potentially stressful situations may ease anxiety temporarily, but is not a long-term solution (not to mention unrealistic). Gradually exposing your kids to the sources of their fears and anxieties can rewire the brain to prove to a child that they can survive anxious moments. It can also teach a child that you are trustworthy, even when you push them to do things that initially make them nervous.

3. Give them tools to fight their fears on their own. The emotional center of the brain takes time to *sloooooow* down once it's agitated. There are a few tools that will help your kid calm down enough so the thinking center of the brain can come back online to logic through the distress. Remember, you won't always be around to walk your kid through their anxious moments. It's important to help them develop coping skills they can practice on their own!

Breathe: Practice deep-breathing with your kid. As breathing slows down, so do the thoughts racing around the brain. Read up on Belly Breathing and/or similar techniques.

Get active: Getting up and moving around can help work out anxious energy. (Outside whenever possible.)

Think happy thoughts: Teach your kid to redirect their thoughts by remembering something happy like a trip to the beach or a birthday party.

4. MAKE IT PERSONAL

Our kids are always watching us. They observe how we react in different situations—especially in situations where we're under a large amount of pressure and stress. It's important for you (as a parent *and* for your own well-being) to be intentional about caring for yourself when it comes to your own anxiety. Make sure you have someone you can open up to honestly about your own fears and concerns.

5. WIDEN THE CIRCLE

Only you know your kid, but if your child exhibits more serious behaviors, then it may be time to reach out a professional. Keep in mind that some children are more prone to anxiety than others. If your kid's anxiety is preventing them from having an overall happy life, if they're unable to leave the house or play with other children, consult with your pediatrician or a licensed counselor.

Seeking professional help isn't a sign of failure as a parent. It makes you a good parent when you realize your child sometimes needs more than you are able to give.

¹<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/anxiety-in-children-2018081414532>



ANXIETY CONVERSATION GUIDE

...for parents of middle schoolers

presented by @parentcue

Middle school has always been stressful, but research tells us that teenagers today are facing more pressure than ever before. Juggling the changing demands in grades, relationships, and growing responsibilities places our teens at a much higher risk for stress. But some students are experiencing more than stress—they are struggling with anxiety.

Stress is our body's and mind's response to certain situations in life. It can make us have sweaty palms or a rapid heartbeat. We can have difficulty sleeping, our minds running wild with thoughts and conversations. While stress is usually short-term, it can make us feel restless, nauseous, and irritable. Stress can be either positive or negative, and is usually a reaction to something specific in our lives.

Stress is about experiencing temporary reactions like frustration, nervousness, or a jolt of energy. Anxiety is more about feeling overwhelmed and worried for long periods of time.

Anxiety is an overwhelming feeling of worry, unease, or fear that lingers, interfering with how we live our everyday lives. Anxiety continues after a stressful situation has been resolved. Sometimes we can pinpoint why we have anxiety, and other times we can't.

While there is a certain amount of stress that's healthy, anxiety can interfere with sleep, diet, relationships, and other areas that are critical to a student's health and well-being.

Anxiety can manifest itself in different ways. It's important to know what to look for when it comes to teens and anxiety¹:

- Emotional changes: more-than-usual agitation or sadness, increase in withdrawn behavior—becoming “stuck in their head”
- Behavioral changes: changes in diet, sleep patterns, or avoiding normal daily activities
- Cognitive changes: decreased concentration, forgetfulness, and/or the appearance of carelessness

Some of these signs may sound like normal teenage behavior. That's why it's important to be in consistent communication with your kid—so you're aware of what's typical on a day-to-day basis.

Here are a few things you can say and questions you can ask to gauge your middle schooler's stress and anxiety levels.

(Keep in mind, these conversations aren't always easy to have. Timing is everything. Try to initiate this conversation when you think your teen will be open to having it. When necessary, involve your ministry leader or professional counselors.)

WHAT TO SAY

TO FIND OUT IF YOUR STUDENT IS EXPERIENCING ANXIETY

- How have you been sleeping? Are you getting enough rest?
- I can't fix things for you, but I'm always here to listen.
- What's taking up the most space in your brain right now?
- What friendships do you have that are stressing you out?
- Which classes at school do you have trouble with? How can I help?
- Is there anyone at school who gives you a hard time? A person or group of people who make you uncomfortable?
- I know there are lots of things changing for you right now. Let's talk about some of those.
- Sometimes I worry about little things just as much as big things. Are there any little things on your mind that you want to talk about?
- I know what it's like to be stressed out for no reason. Has that ever happened to you?
- We live in a world where some pretty scary things happen. Do any of those ever worry you? How do you let things go when they are out of your control? How do you determine what is in your control and what is not?

WHEN YOU KNOW YOUR STUDENT IS EXPERIENCING ANXIETY

- On a scale of 0-10, how much stress are you feeling right now?
- What's one thought you keep having over and over again?
- Is there a certain time of day when you feel the most stress or anxiety? Let's talk about some ways to handle that.
- You haven't been sleeping/eating like you normally do. Is there anything you want to talk about?
- What is your biggest fear right now? Let's talk about what would happen if that fear came true.
- What's one thing about the future that stresses you out?
- How can I help the next time you feel nervous? (What can I say, do, etc. Many times a child's love language can be a helpful "go to" way to calm a child.)
- What's your favorite way to relax when you're feeling anxious? (If they don't have an answer for this, it could be a red flag that your child may need additional help.)

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Our kids are always watching us. They observe how we react in different situations—especially in situations where we're under a large amount of pressure and stress. It's important for you (as a parent *and* for your own well-being) to be intentional about caring for yourself when it comes to your own anxiety.

If you want your student to practice good nutrition, healthy sleep patterns, and exercise, those need to be priorities in your own life, too.

Make sure you have someone you can open up to honestly about your own fears and concerns. And, if necessary, consult the help of a ministry leader or professional.

WIDEN THE CIRCLE

Only you know your kid, but if your teen exhibits these behaviors, then it may be time to reach out a professional:

- Increased need for reassurance
- Increased time to self/isolation
- Frequent difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Increased difficulty managing emotions
- Easily tired
- Deflated affect (decreased emotional expression)
- ANY suicidal thoughts (any talk of life not being worth the work/too tired to keep going/being gone/no one caring/death)
- ANY instances of self-harm
- Sudden change in grades
- Significant change in appetite/weight change
- Lacking interest in previously enjoyed activities
- ANY drug/alcohol use including nicotine

Seeking professional help isn't a sign of failure as a parent. Being a good parent doesn't mean you are the source of everything your child needs, but it does mean that you reach out when you realize a situation is beyond your resources.

¹<https://www.psycom.net/common-triggers-teen-stress/>