

# A NOTE TO GROWN-UPS

It can be tough to see your child struggle with anxiety and the problems it causes. Taking the extra time to deal again and again with a child's worries can be exhausting. You may feel frustrated when, despite your reassurance, your child continues to be fearful. Yet your child needs your continued support. This chapter will offer you some practical information and ideas so you can help more effectively.

## How Children React When They're Fearful

Different children respond to their fears in different ways. Some kids are very open about them, others show their anxieties and fears in their behavior. For example:

- denying that there's a problem (this occurs especially with boys)
- becoming or seeming emotionally numb
- playing more aggressively
- frequently re-creating traumatic situations during play
- avoiding new situations
- developing bodily symptoms such as aches, pains, or appetite and sleep disturbances

## How to Help Your Child

**Give lots of encouragement.** Give your child as much encouragement as possible for her attempts to practice the exercises in this book. If she has trouble or feels like giving up, reassure her that with time and practice, you're confident she will eventually learn to overcome her fears.

**Set an example for handling situations without anxiety.** Anxious children are often overly sensitive to their parents' feelings. If you're afraid of social situations and respond by avoiding them or panicking, your child notices. If you overreact to your child's cuts and bruises, your child senses and takes on your anxiety. Dealing with your own worries and fears will help your child greatly.

Most of the information in this book also applies to adults with anxiety problems; you can also seek counseling if you think it might help you.

**Make exercise a family activity.** Exercise can be very helpful for anxious children, but many of them don't want to do it alone. Ask your child to join you in doing something active, such as a walk, a bike ride, or chores.

**Let your child know it's okay to express feelings.** Many children don't like talking about how they feel. Reassure your child that though it may be hard to talk about strong emotions, the more he does so, the sooner he will start feeling better. Children are sensitive to how adults react when they do share their feelings, so it's important to show that you are accepting of those feelings. If you react with alarm or by criticizing, making fun, ignoring, or yelling, your child may stop confiding in you.

**Be a coach.** It's more helpful to act as a coach to your child than it is to just tell her what to do. Help your child think of ways to overcome her fear or anxiety.

**Consider reward systems.** For some children, rewards can be an extra incentive to do the hard work necessary to overcome fears. For other children, a reward system can seem like another opportunity to fail. Ask your child first if he would like to try a reward system—don't push it. Reassure him that if it doesn't work, it doesn't mean he has failed. It just means you need to try something different.

Reward systems work best for younger children, up to about age 12. Make a day-by-day chart of the behaviors you want to encourage. Decide on how many points, from 1 to 5, your child can earn with each behavior. Make a separate list of rewards your child would like to earn and the number of points needed to earn each one. Then, at the end of every day, review the chart together. At the end of the week, your child can "spend" the points she has earned. Some children may need to get their rewards more often, even daily, in order for a chart to work. See what works best.

For example:

BEHAVIOR GOAL	SAT	SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THR	FRI
Stayed at school all day							
Did deep breathing							
Was able to stop worrying							
Asked for help							

## When Is Counseling Needed?

If you and your child try the ideas in this book and nothing seems to work, it's wise to seek professional help. If your child is having many physical symptoms, such as aches and pains, first take him to the pediatrician for a checkup. Sometimes there are medical reasons for physical symptoms, and this possibility should be ruled out.

## Who Offers Counseling?

Mental health professionals such as psychologists, social workers, and licensed professional counselors can provide therapy for your child, if needed. They can diagnose the problem and decide whether your child's worries are normal or whether the problem is more serious. Be sure to ask what kind of training and experience the therapist has in working with children with anxiety disorders. If you aren't sure where to start looking for a therapist, ask the school guidance counselor or a health-care professional for recommendations. You can also check the phone book under Mental Health Services or Counselors or Psychologists. The list of organizations on page 119 may also be of assistance. Let the agency know if cost is a concern; ask if free or low-cost services are available.

## How Does Counseling Work?

*Cognitive behavioral therapy* is an effective, and probably the most common, technique used with children with anxiety disorders. The counselor will teach your child ways to

think and behave differently to lessen the anxiety. Homework assignments are given to help your child practice the new skills in between sessions. Many of the suggestions in this book are based on this approach.

Counseling may last weeks or months depending on how severe the problem is. Ask your child's therapist for regular feedback to make sure progress is occurring. If you don't see progress, ask the therapist for an explanation.

### **Will Medication Be Necessary?**

When counseling is not working, or when the symptoms are so severe they're interfering with daily life, the therapist may recommend medication. Usually, a child psychiatrist will be consulted who can prescribe and monitor the medication. A child psychiatrist is a medical doctor with specialized training in working with children who are experiencing emotional and behavioral problems.

Before your child is placed on any medication, it's wise to insist on a full medical checkup complete with blood work. This way, the doctor can monitor any effects the medicine may have. Bring your child in for regular checkups once a medication has been prescribed.

While medicines can be very effective and safe when properly monitored, there can be risks. Ask the doctor or pharmacist about any concerns you have regarding safety, side effects, or other questions.

### **A Special Note to Dads with Anxious Sons**

Because men are often raised believing they have to be strong and overcome their fears without help, it's not unusual for a father to have trouble accepting his son's problems with anxiety. As a father, you may have trouble relating to your son's fears if you don't have problems with fears yourself. Or if you were fearful as a child, you may overreact by pushing your son too much to face his fears because you don't want him to go through what you did. You may be afraid that your son is being "wimpy"

and wonder if talking “tough” with him will help him overcome his fear. Unfortunately, this often makes fears and anxieties worse, and can actually cause problems later in life. Your support now can help prevent future problems. Rather than be critical, assume the role of a supportive coach with your son. In the long run, you’ll find that this works much better.

### Remember . . .

While it’s hard to see your child struggle with worries and fears, you can provide valuable help. By monitoring your own behavior, helping your child learn and practice the exercises in this book, and pursuing counseling and medication when needed, you can help ensure that your child is able to overcome troubling fears and lead a more productive life.