

## *Essential Tips for Helping Children with Anxiety*

Dealing with anxiety can be difficult, embarrassing , and exhausting for children and families. Help can come from a number of sources and the most powerful influence on a young person is the primary family. The following article will outline how to recognize and respond to anxiety, stress, and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) in children and adolescents .

First recognize the signs. Due to the fast pace of modern life and the increasing demands on young people to “super” perform, it is often difficult to discern whether a child is having trouble with anxiety, stress or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). The behaviors and attitudes that are associated with troublesome levels of anxiety for some children are sometimes very close to the normal and natural pace of life for other children, so how is a parent to know when there is a problem? Here are 3 things to consider:

1. Does your child seem over committed and overtaxed? Often parents will have a gut feeling that their child is involved in too many activities for their own good but since other children seem to be scheduled just as tightly they think that it is “normal”. Remember that the tolerance for activity is different for each child and not all children will thrive under the same circumstances. Some children simply need more quiet time to reflect, think, play and grow. It is ok and natural to allow kids some regular down-time in their lives, so resist the temptation to schedule every waking moment.

2. Do you notice behaviors that are troublesome? This is an objective system of observation where you try to remove your own emotions and judgments from the process and simply observe. Is my child engaging in repetitive behaviors? Is he or she acting embarrassed or angry because of being caught checking, repeating, or cleaning? Is your child excessively crying or acting aloof? If any of these are present to an extent that causes concern for you, trust your gut (instinct) and have your child evaluated by a professional counselor. It is always better to know how your child is doing and if there are problems, it is comforting to talk with a specialist and find that there are treatment programs to help.

3. Have you received feedback from others that might indicate a problem? Social feedback is a valuable tool because others have a less personal investment in the raising of your child. Listen to other adults and kids whom you trust and admire. If you are hearing concerns about their well-being, behaviors, or school and social performance take it seriously to heart and decide for yourself if their concerns have any merit.

Next: listen, listen, listen. Kids and adults don't always know how to communicate clearly, especially when they are all in the same family. There will be times in the lives of your children when you might be convinced that they are actually speaking a foreign language! But in any regard, there will be times when simply listening will have more value than you can imagine; even when you don't actually "get it". Parents who take the time to listen to their children impart strong emotional messages of love, concern, consistency, and dedication that cannot be communicated on any stronger level. Hang in there with your kids and be willing to listen to their concerns because, just like with adults, talking can work wonders for anxiety.



Third, create an at-home program for stress-busting. Evaluate your child's time spent in these stress reducing activities and decide whether he or she should ramp up involvement in:

1. Exercise – many children need to increase their involvement in physical activity which has been empirically demonstrated to reduce stress levels. Ensure that your child's time is spent in balance between rest, school, study, play, and exercise.
2. Play – how much time does your child get to spend doing the “work of children”? Play is essential to optimal growth and development for children and can sometimes get lost in the chores, school activities and organized sports that tend to take up most of the day. Ensure your child has some quality play time, alone or with others.
3. Structure and consistency – Children thrive with the right balance of rules and personal freedom. Sometimes rules slip and consistency gets difficult to manage and this can cause stress for young ones. If you struggle with this balance, do not hesitate to consult a counselor who can evaluate your child's experience and give you helpful suggestions on how to balance this delicate matter. Sometimes the smallest changes can make a remarkable impact on your child's behavior and well being.

And finally, check-in on your own anxiety and stress levels. Children sense our levels of stress even when we are trying to hide them. Young people have an open, unbiased, and receptive system that allows them to tap into the feelings, thoughts, and motivations of adults much more quickly. If you are dealing with an anxious child or teen, it is natural that you may feel anxious yourself. Heightened levels of anxiety and stress could be due to your own history with anxiety and stress management or it could be a result of caregiver fatigue. Either way, it is important to take time out to renew your own experience of anxiety and stress without feelings of guilt or remorse. Ensure that you are living a balanced lifestyle that includes time away from your children. Talking things through with a trusted loved one or friend can help reduce anxiety and stress levels immensely. If needed, have your own therapist to assist you with self-care while you are helping your child. Either way, remember, that both you and your child are well worthy of love, time, attention and care so don't forget yourself in that equation.

This article was presented by Donna Parker, Ph.D., Pediatric Anxiety Disorders Specialist and creator of the Whole Life Lift Program in Bellevue, Washington.

For more information about Dr. Parker's practice visit her website at [www.drdonnaparker.com](http://www.drdonnaparker.com) , or contact her directly at (425) 394-3008