

## **How can I help my child with anxiety?**

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As parents of children with ADHD and Learning Disabilities (LD), you might often find yourself wondering, “Why is my child always so anxious?” Or perhaps you’re asking, “How can I help my child overcome this anxiety?” Anxiety can show up in many ways, from hesitation to try new activities to overwhelming worries about school and friendships. Recognizing why children with ADHD and LD are more likely to experience anxiety can help us address it more effectively. This article dives into practical, easy-to-apply strategies that will help your child manage their anxiety, build resilience, and thrive despite their challenges.

Anxiety is a common and natural experience for many children, especially when they encounter new situations, challenges, and uncertainties. At its core, anxiety is the body’s response to perceived threats or stress, preparing us to face or avoid danger. Although anxiety is often seen as negative, it can actually be helpful. For instance, feeling anxious before a test or school performance can motivate a child to prepare and strive for their best. This type of anxiety shows they care about their efforts and want to succeed. However, when anxiety becomes overwhelming or persistent, it can interfere with daily activities, social interactions, and overall well-being. If your child is experiencing anxiety, you might notice signs such as excessive worry, physical symptoms like stomachaches or headaches, trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, and reluctance to go to school. They may also seem shy, avoid certain activities, throw tantrums at bedtime, cry, or cling to you when it’s time to leave.

Children with ADHD and LD often experience higher levels of anxiety due to the unique challenges they face in school, social situations, and daily life. Their difficulties with attention, organization, and processing information can lead to frustration and feelings of inadequacy, making them more vulnerable to anxiety. These children may worry about not meeting expectations, struggle with peer relationships, or feel overwhelmed by tasks that others find manageable. Anxiety can exacerbate the challenges already posed by ADHD and LD, creating a cycle where anxiety impacts attention and learning, and vice versa, making it harder to succeed.

But the good news is that anxiety is treatable. Many parents find it challenging to know how to respond, but there are effective strategies you can use to support your child and help them feel better.

### **1. Validate Their Feelings and Concerns**

Children's thoughts, feelings, and experiences are very real to them. Regardless of your own perspective, it's important to validate their emotions to help them feel understood and supported. Empathize with their situation and acknowledge that their feelings and experiences are important.

- For example, if your child says, "I'm really nervous about starting at the new school. What if I don't make any friends?" you can respond, "I completely understand why you're feeling anxious. Starting at a new school is a big change, and it's normal to feel nervous. It's okay to be worried about making friends. Let's discuss what we can do to help you feel more prepared and comfortable. What do you think might help you feel better about starting this new school?"

## **2. Promote Problem-Solving Skills**

Help your child develop problem-solving skills by breaking down their fears into smaller, manageable steps. Encourage them to think of possible solutions and support them in trying out different strategies.

- For example, if your child is feeling overwhelmed by writing an essay, break the task into smaller steps. Start by outlining the essay, then focus on writing one section at a time. Use timers for short work sessions and encourage them to seek help or use tools if they encounter difficulties. Celebrate each completed step to build their problem-solving skills and confidence.

## **3. Model Healthy Coping Mechanisms**

Children often look to their parents for guidance on handling stress and emotions. Model healthy coping mechanisms by managing your own stress in a calm and constructive way. By showing how you handle stress positively, you teach your child effective ways to cope with their own anxiety.

- For example, if you've had a tough day at work, instead of letting stress overwhelm you, you might say, "I've had a challenging day, so I'm going to take a few minutes to relax and clear my mind." You could demonstrate this by practicing deep breathing or engaging in a calming activity.

## **4. Encourage Gradual Exposure**

If your child is anxious about specific situations, like social interactions or school, encourage gradual exposure. Start with small, manageable steps and

progressively increase the level of exposure as your child becomes more comfortable.

- For example, if your child is anxious about making new friends, start by encouraging them to smile and say “hi” to one person. Once they feel comfortable, they can move on to sitting next to a classmate at lunch or asking someone to play during recess. Gradually, they can work up to inviting a friend over for a playdate.

## **5. Foster a Growth Mindset**

Encourage your child to view challenges as opportunities to learn and grow. Help them understand that mistakes and setbacks are part of the learning process, and persistence can lead to improvement.

- For example, if your child struggles with math, you might say, “I know math feels tough right now, but every time you practice, you’re getting better. Mistakes are just part of how we learn. Let’s figure out what was tricky this time and work on it together. You have the ability to improve with time and effort.” Emphasizing effort over perfection helps your child see setbacks as valuable learning experiences.

## **6. Limit Avoidance Behaviors**

While it might be tempting to let your child avoid anxiety-provoking situations, this can reinforce their fears. Instead, gently encourage them to face their fears with your support and through the stepwise approach described above. Provide reassurance and praise for their efforts, even if progress is slow.

- For example, if your child is afraid of speaking up in class, start by encouraging them to answer a question in front of just one or two classmates they feel comfortable with rather than not doing the task at all. As they succeed in these smaller situations, they can gradually work up to speaking in front of the whole class.

## **7. Guide Your Child in Finding Relaxing Activities**

Encourage your child to practice relaxation techniques to help manage their anxiety. One effective method is deep breathing, which involves taking slow, deliberate breaths to calm the mind and body. Teach them to inhale deeply through their nose for a count of four, hold the breath for a count of four, and then exhale slowly through their mouth for a count of six. Incorporate this technique into their

daily routine, perhaps as part of a wind-down before bed or during moments of heightened stress.

Also encourage them to create a list of activities that help them feel more at ease. They might enjoy going for a walk, using a fidget toy, building with puzzles or LEGO, drawing or painting, talking with friends, or cooking and baking. Engaging in these activities can help soothe their mind and body when anxiety arises.

## **8. Create a Routine**

Establishing a predictable daily routine can provide a sense of security and reduce anxiety. Consistent sleep, meals, and activity schedules can help your child feel more in control and less anxious.

## **9. Use Positive Reinforcement**

Positive reinforcement involves encouraging and rewarding your child's efforts and progress when they face their fears or manage anxiety effectively. This can help build their confidence and reinforce their coping skills.

- For example, if your child makes an effort to speak up in class despite their anxiety, you could praise their bravery and give them a small reward, like extra playtime or a special treat.

## **10. Seek Professional Support**

If your child's anxiety is persistent or severe, consider seeking support from a mental health professional. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is particularly effective for treating anxiety in children, as it teaches them how anxiety works, challenges their fears through exposure, and offers them tools to manage their anxiety.

## **Main takeaways**

Dealing with anxiety in children with LD/ADHD can feel overwhelming, but there's hope and help available. By validating your child's feelings, breaking down daunting tasks into manageable steps, and modeling calmness, you can empower them to face their fears and build confidence. Encourage gradual exposure, celebrate their progress, and create a comforting routine to provide a sense of stability. With these strategies, you're not just helping your child cope—you're setting them up for success. And if the journey becomes too challenging, remember that professional support is always an option to guide you and your child towards a brighter path.

## **Further Resources for Parents**

### **Books**

“Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents” by Ronald M. Rapee, Ann Wignall, & Others

“Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous and Independent Children” by Lynn Lyons and Reid Wilson

“The Resilience Recipe: A Parent’s Guide to Raising Fearless Kids in the Age of Anxiety” by Muniya Khanna and Phillip Kendall

“Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Practical Strategies to Overcome Fears, Worries and Phobias and Be Prepared for Life – From Toddlers to Teens” by Tamar Chansky

“Playing with Anxiety: Casey’s Guide for Teens and Kids” by Lynn Lyons and Reid Wilson

### **Internet Resources**

Anxiety Canada: [www.anxietycanada.com](http://www.anxietycanada.com)

ChildMind Institute: <https://childmind.org/topics/anxiety/>

Worrywisekids <https://worrywisekids.org/>

Flusterclux: Fix Anxiety with Lynn Lyons <https://www.flusterclux.com/>

### **Apps**

#### ***Calm***

Lower stress, less anxiety, and more restful sleep with our guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, masterclasses, and relaxing music.

#### ***Headspace***

Relax with guided meditations and mindfulness techniques that bring calm, wellness and balance to your life in just a few minutes a day.