



Big Brothers Big Sisters.[®]

OF NORTHEAST INDIANA

Helping Your Little with Anxiety



About Anxiety

About anxiety

Anxiety is **the feeling of worry, apprehension or dread** that something bad is going to happen or that you can't cope with a situation. It's also the physical reactions that go with the feeling, like 'butterflies in the stomach', tension, shakiness, nausea and sweatiness. And it's behaviour like avoiding what's causing the anxiety or wanting a lot of reassurance.

Anxiety can happen in response to a specific situation or event, but it continues after the situation has passed. It can happen without a specific situation or event too.

Anxiety is a common and natural part of life. Everyone feels anxious sometimes.

Anxiety can look and feel similar to stress.

Stress is a response to external challenges, pressures or events. When your child feels stressed, their heart rate might go up, their breathing might get faster and their muscles might tense up. When you understand the difference between anxiety and stress, it can help you work out what your child is feeling and how to help.



Helping Your Little with Anxiety



Anxiety in pre-teens and teenagers

Anxiety is **very common in the pre-teen and teenage years.**

This is because adolescence is a time of emotional, physical and social change, which is happening at the same time as [teenage brains are changing](#). Pre-teens and teenagers are seeking new experiences and more [independence](#). It's natural for teenagers to feel anxious about these changes, opportunities and challenges.

For example, pre-teens and teenagers might feel anxious about starting secondary school, looking a particular way, fitting in with friends, starting their first job, performing in school plays or going to school formals. Also, as their independence increases, they might feel anxious about responsibilities, money and employment.

Anxiety in pre-teens and teenagers **isn't always a bad thing**. Feeling anxious can help to keep teenagers safe by getting them to think about the situation they're in. It can also motivate them to do their best. And it can help them get ready for challenging situations like public speaking or sporting events.

Helping Your Little with Anxiety



Helping pre-teens and teenagers manage anxious feelings

Learning to manage anxiety is an important life skill, which you can help your child learn. Here are ideas.

Encourage your child to talk about anxieties

Just talking about the things that make them anxious can reduce the amount of anxiety your child feels. Talking and [listening](#) also helps you understand what's going on for your child. And when you understand, you're better able to help your child manage anxieties or [find solutions to problems](#).

Acknowledge your child's feelings

Your child's anxiety is real, even if the thing they feel anxious about is unlikely to happen. This means it's important to acknowledge your child's anxiety and tell them you're confident they can handle it. This is better than telling them not to worry, because telling a child not to worry sends the message that worry isn't a valid feeling. For example, your child might be anxious about passing an exam. Let them know you understand how they feel, but you're sure they'll do their best and that's the most important thing.

When you acknowledge your child's feelings with warmth and compassion, it helps your child to use [self-compassion](#) in challenging situations too.

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Encourage brave behaviour

This involves gently encouraging your child to set small goals for things they feel anxious about. Just avoid pushing your child to face situations they don't feel ready to face. For example, your child might be anxious about performing in front of others. As a first step, you could suggest your child practices their lines in front of the family.

You can also help your child by encouraging them to use:

- positive self-talk – for example, 'I can handle this. I've been in situations like this before'
- self-compassion – for example, 'It's OK if I do this differently from other people. This way works for me'
- assertiveness – for example, 'I need some help with this project'.

It's also good to [praise](#) your child for doing something they feel anxious about, no matter how small it is.

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Try to be a good role model for your child in the way that you [manage your own anxiety](#). You could remind your child that it's natural to feel anxious sometimes. You could tell them about the things that you feel anxious about now or that made you feel anxious when you were younger. It's also good to talk about how you cope with anxiety.

Helping Your Little with Anxiety



Helping pre-teens and teenagers feel safe and secure

When pre-teens and teenagers feel safe and secure, they're better able to cope with the everyday challenges and anxiety of adolescence. You can help your child feel safe and secure by:

- spending time with your child – for example, preparing dinner, going for a walk or watching a movie together
- having a family routine that includes time for some family meals, plus other family rituals
- making time in your family routine for things that your child finds relaxing, like listening to music, reading books or going for walks
- spending time with people your child likes, trusts and feels comfortable around.

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Encouraging pre-teens and teenagers to make healthy choices

Healthy lifestyle choices can often help pre-teens and teenagers handle anxiety. For example, going for a walk instead of sitting at home worrying can help to clear your child's mind.

Here are some healthy choices that can help your child with everyday anxiety:

- Get plenty of physical activity, pre-teen sleep or teenage sleep, and healthy food and drink.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and other drugs.
- Avoid unnecessary stress by not putting things off or being late.
- Do breathing exercises, muscle relaxation exercises or mindfulness exercises.



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When to be concerned about anxiety

If you're concerned about your child's anxiety, it's a good idea to seek professional help.

You might consider seeing your GP or another health professional if your child:

- constantly feels nervous, anxious or on edge, or can't stop or control worrying
- has anxious feelings that go on for weeks, months or even longer
- has anxious feelings that interfere with their schoolwork, socialising and everyday activities.

When anxiety is severe and long lasting, it might be an [anxiety disorder](#). Anxiety disorders usually respond very well to professional treatment. And the earlier anxiety disorders are treated, the less likely they are to affect young people's mental health and development in the long term.

