

# SUPPORTING YOUR KIDS WITH ANXIETY



## Lead by example.

From the moment of their birth, children are like sponges, absorbing everything around them. When your kid observes you managing stress and anxiety with composure and self-kindness, they are far more likely to feel empowered to handle their own anxious feelings with greater ease and confidence.

Here are a few specific ways that you can model working skillfully with anxiety and stress:

- **Deep Breathing:** When you feel anxious, you can practice deep breathing exercises in front of your kid. Take slow, deep breaths and explain to your child that this technique helps to calm the mind, nervous system, and body when feeling stressed or worried.
- **Expressing Your Emotions:** You can openly talk about your own feelings and emotions with your children. For instance, if you had a stressful day at work, you could share how you managed your stress and what strategies you used to feel better.
- **Mindfulness Activities:** Engaging in mindfulness activities like meditation or yoga in the presence of your child can demonstrate how to focus on the present moment and gently release anxious thoughts.
- **Problem-Solving:** When facing a challenge that causes anxiety, you can involve your child in the problem-solving process. This shows your child how to approach difficulties constructively and *with genuine curiosity*, which reduces the fear associated with uncertainties.
- **Self-Care:** Demonstrating self-care practices is essential. You can explain how taking breaks, engaging in hobbies, or spending time in nature helps you recharge and better manage your anxiety.
- **Positive Self-Talk + Self-kindness:** Be mindful of your self-talk and avoid negative, anxious, or self-critical language. Instead, you can speak positively about yourself and the situations you encounter and show how being kind to yourself makes navigating challenges so much easier.
- **Seeking Support:** If you struggle with significant anxiety, seeking professional help or counseling demonstrates to your child that it's okay and strong to ask for support when needed.
- **Avoiding Overprotection:** You can avoid being overprotective and encourage your child to face age-appropriate challenges. This helps your child develop resilience and confidence in handling anxiety-provoking situations.
- **Practicing Patience:** When you encounter stressful situations, practicing patience and remaining calm models how to handle difficulties without letting anxiety escalate.

## Start with empathy.

When you approach your child's anxious feelings with understanding and compassion, you create a safe and supportive space for them to express themselves openly. Validating their emotions and acknowledging that it's okay to feel anxious will help them feel less alone and more accepted. This empathy opens the door for effective communication and allows you to work alongside your child to find healthy ways to manage or overcome their anxious feelings.

Two crucial ingredients for empathy are:

- **Active Listening:** When your child expresses their anxious feelings, stop multitasking so you can give them your full attention and actively listen to what they are saying. Avoid interrupting or dismissing their emotions. For example, if they share that they feel anxious about an upcoming test, listen attentively and respond with empathy by saying, *"I can understand that tests can feel stressful. It's normal to feel anxious about them, but I believe in you, and we can work together to help you prepare."*
- **Validation and Affirmation:** Validate your child's emotions and let them know that it's okay to feel anxious. Offer words of affirmation and support. For instance, if your child is nervous about a social event, you can say, *"It's okay to feel nervous about meeting new people. Lots of people feel that way - even I do sometimes. Just be yourself, and remember, I'm here for you no matter what."*

## Meet your kid's four non-negotiable needs.

According to renowned physician and author Gabor Maté, kids have four non-negotiable needs that parents and caregivers can meet to create a nurturing and supportive environment that fosters healthy emotional growth. These needs are:

### #1. SECURE ATTACHMENT

- Secure attachment refers to a healthy emotional bond between a child and their primary caregiver, typically a parent, where the child feels safe, loved, and supported. To cultivate secure attachment, you need to create a nurturing and responsive environment. This involves being consistently available and responsive to your child's needs, providing comfort and reassurance during times of distress, and engaging in positive and affectionate interactions. Building trust through consistent caregiving, showing empathy towards your child's emotions, and encouraging exploration and independence are vital in developing a secure attachment. Open communication, active listening, and validating your child's feelings also play key roles. By establishing a secure attachment, you will lay the foundation for your child's emotional well-being and future relationships and help them build resilience and a positive sense of self.

### #2. REST

- Your child should not have to "work" to make their relationship with you work. In other words, your child needs to know that your love is unconditional - you will love them no matter what. Instead of *"I'll accept you and love you and like you if you behave in such and such way, or if you're cute or smart or not anxious..."* they need to know there's nothing they have to do to be fully loved and accepted by you.

### #3. PERMISSION TO EXPERIENCE ALL EMOTIONS

- It's profoundly important to support and validate the full spectrum of emotions in your child. This includes normalizing all feelings, from anger and frustration or sadness and grief to joy and excitement. You can help your child identify their feelings by teaching them how to name their emotions out loud.
- It's also important to distinguish the difference between feelings and behaviors. You can affirm your child's feelings while also setting boundaries around their behavior. For example, if your child is hitting other kids, you can say to them, *"I see that you're very angry right now, and that's okay. It's not okay to hit other kids, but it is okay to feel angry."*
- Here's another example using anxiety. Imagine your child is feeling anxious about an upcoming school presentation. You can validate their anxious feelings while setting boundaries around anxious behavior.
  - Validation: *"I can see that you're feeling nervous about the presentation. It's normal to feel that way when facing something new or important."*
  - Setting a Boundary: *"It's okay to feel anxious, but I don't want you to avoid the presentation because of the anxiety. I believe in you, and I know you can do it. Let's work together to find some strategies to help you feel more confident."*

### #4. FREE AND SPONTANEOUS PLAY OUT IN NATURE

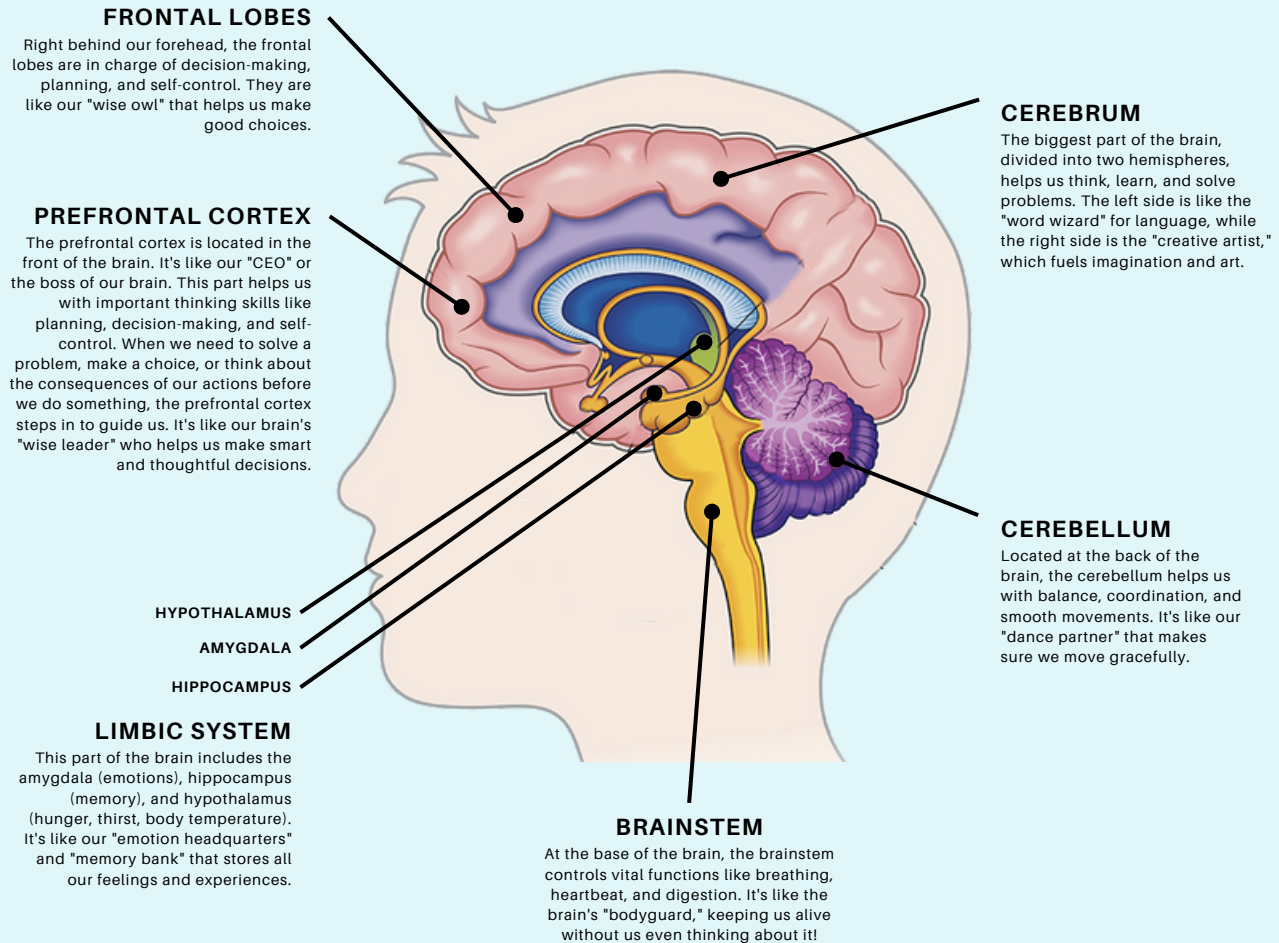
- Play is a natural and innate way for children to explore and make sense of the world around them. Engaging in unstructured, imaginative play allows children to freely express their feelings and emotions, reducing internalized stress and anxiety.
- During play, children can act out different scenarios, experiment with their emotions, and develop problem-solving skills, which helps them process and release any pent-up emotions, fears, or anxieties they might be experiencing. Play also offers a safe space where children can take on different roles and work through difficult or confusing situations, giving them a sense of control and empowerment.
- Play also promotes the release of "feel-good" neurochemicals in the brain, such as dopamine and endorphins, which have a calming and mood-enhancing effect. This can help regulate the child's emotions and reduce anxiety.
- In today's fast-paced and structured world, free spontaneous play is increasingly important to help children disconnect from academic pressures and technology, offering them much-needed space to relax and recharge emotionally. By encouraging and facilitating free play, you give your children a valuable tool to better cope with anxiety and build their resilience.



## Help your kid understand their brain.

We've created a simple diagram for you to share with them below!

# YOUR BRAIN AND ITS MAGICAL PARTS



## YOUR BRAIN AND ANXIETY

Did you know that your brain is like a super-cool control center? When you feel anxious, a little part called the amygdala, which is like a tiny security guard, alerts you to possible danger. It's normal for the amygdala to do this, but sometimes it gets a bit too worried, like a watchful, overprotective friend. But guess what? You have a superhero in your brain called the prefrontal cortex, right behind your forehead. When you give a name to your anxious feelings, like "butterflies in my tummy," it's like calling your wise leader to the rescue! The prefrontal cortex helps you think clearly and find the best way to handle the situation. So, next time you feel anxious, remember to name your feelings; your superhero brain will help you feel brave and in control!



## Practice gratitude and loving-kindness.

As a parent, addressing anxiety head-on with your kids is essential, but it's equally crucial to help them learn to fill their emotional cup in other ways. Talking openly about anxiety and providing tools to manage it empowers your child to navigate their emotions confidently. However, you can also introduce practices like gratitude and loving kindness.

Encouraging your child to notice the good things in life and express appreciation helps them focus on the positive, fostering resilience amidst challenges. Teaching them loving kindness towards themselves and others also nurtures empathy and emotional well-being.

Balancing these approaches helps build a strong foundation for our children, where they can bravely face their fears while finding comfort in the abundance of love and positivity around them.

Here are a few ideas to build more gratitude and loving-kindness into your routine:

### GRATITUDE

- **Start a Dinnertime Gratitude Ritual.**
  - Go around the table and invite each person to share one thing they're grateful for. You may get some resistance at first, but see if you can stick with it (even if it's clunky or feels forced). Your fam/partner may start to really enjoy and look forward to it.
- **Make a Gratitude Jar!**
  - This one's great for younger kiddos. Each day, family members write down one thing on a small piece of colorful paper and put it into the jar. Then, on Sunday of each week (or at the end of the month), you can take turns reading all of them out loud. It's like a gratitude waterfall!
- **Create a "Wall of Thanks".**
  - Dedicate some empty wall space for a "Wall of Thanks". It can be as fancy or simple as you'd like - even a blank surface with some sticky notes will do. Invite your family to write things down regularly - scheduling a consistent time helps, e.g. a weekend morning. It's also an awesome solo activity. I (Rena) did this as a single person for many years. The ongoing visual reminder is powerful and helps fuel a grateful mindset.



## LOVING-KINDNESS

Bedtime is a great opportunity to practice loving-kindness with your kid.

- Set the ambience in the room by either turning on a nightlight or salt lamp, or you could help your kid light a candle. Then tuck them in, get them all cozy in their bed, and find a comfortable place for yourself in their room.
- Ask them to pick one or two people they'd like to send loving-kindness to (this could be a grandparent, a friend at school, a stuffed animal, a pet, etc).
- Invite them to take a couple of deep breaths with you, exhaling out loud with some BIG gentle sighs ("ahhhhh"). If giggles happen, that's great! Laughter can help relax the body.
- Guide them to soften their whole body into the support of their mattress and blankets, letting go of any worries of day, and feeling safe and sound in their bed.
- Next, you can share phrases of loving-kindness out loud while your kid repeats the phrases silently in their mind or whispers them quietly. You'll find a couple of typical loving-kindness phrases below, but feel free to use whatever feels best for you. Begin by inserting the name of the person they chose:
  - *May [grandma] be happy*
  - *May [grandma] be healthy and safe*
  - *May [grandma] feel peaceful*
  - *May [grandma] feel loved*
- You can repeat the above sequence for another person/stuffy/pet, then finish with the following:
  - *May I be happy*
  - *May I be healthy and safe*
  - *May I feel peaceful*
  - *May I feel loved*
- Especially at first, it's helpful to keep the practice short (3-4 minutes), but you can tune as you go. If your kids are loving it, you can add as many rounds/people as you'd like "*May [all of my teachers] be happy...*" "*May [the whole neighborhood] be happy...*" "*May [the whole world] be happy..*", etc. Once your kids get the hang of it (and are old enough), they might enjoy guiding you!



## Seek professional support.

As a parent, you can do a lot to support your child with anxiety, but sometimes seeking help from a mental health professional is necessary. If you notice persistent signs of anxiety that significantly interfere with your child's daily life and well-being, it might be time to reach out for support.

### Some signs to look out for include:

- frequent and intense worries that disrupt normal activities or relationships
- constant fears or phobias that your child is unable to control
- avoiding social situations
- extreme self-criticism
- other sudden behavioral changes
- difficulty sleeping
- changes in appetite
- physical health problems
- if you notice any signs of suicidal thoughts or behaviors, seek help immediately

Reaching out to a mental health professional can provide your child with specialized care and strategies to better navigate their anxiety. It can also offer you some relief as a parent or caregiver, because the professional will share guidance and resources to help you understand your child's anxiety better, learn effective ways to support them, and keep your own anxiety in check during the process. Additionally, addressing anxiety as a family can result in better communication, empathy, and mutual understanding between all family members, which promotes a healthier and more harmonious family dynamic.

