



Center for Cognitive and Behavioral Therapy and Central Ohio Primary Care:
Total Care through Co-Location[®]
Enhanced Behavioral Healthcare through Co-Location in Primary Care

What is Childhood Anxiety?

To understand childhood anxiety in general, let's talk about anxiety itself. Anxiety is a strong reaction within the central nervous system. What we call anxiety really stems from a protective reaction to run or fight back against danger or threats. Anxiety can cause faster breathing and heart beats, cold feelings in the hands and feet, blushing, sleep problems, and overly focused attention. The overly focused attention targets a feared threat or thoughts about something that children believe can hurt them. Anxiety is easily learned as an automatic reaction, and once learned, can reappear without an obvious reason for the reaction. Anxiety shows up as worry thoughts, anxiety attacks, fears of public performing, fears of strangers, fears of separation from loved ones, or phobias about specific things (snakes) or situations (storms, the dark).

Children under the age of 12 usually think differently than teens or adults. In preschool, they think very much in the moment, without working things out in their minds very much. In elementary and middle school, they think very concretely (the rules say, appearance overrides logic, or tit-for-tat thinking). Because children think this way, anxiety isn't thought through logically by children, but instead is experienced as feelings and physical sensations, and often the concrete surroundings or models (like parents) become the source of what scares them.

But anxiety is also normal and fun. The rush of anxiety on a roller coaster is what makes it fun. Flying over the water on an innertube is enjoyable because, in part, our fear is triggered. Learning that anxiety is normal can help us understand that we don't have to be afraid of anxiety.

What are Tips to Help Children with COVID-19 Anxiety?

COVID-19 anxiety has grown in prevalence among children through the pandemic. Children learn the COVID-19 anxiety responses by watching TV news, from COVID-19 anxious adults, and disruptions in their daily lives. Children find COVID-19 fear, as with any health-related childhood anxiety, can be really difficult to work out since the feared item (the virus) can't be seen nor can people who can give it to you be easy to spot. In many ways, COVID-19 mimics anxiety about monsters in the closet, except in this case, the monster is almost invisible while also being real.

Below are some tips for helping children deal with COVID-19 anxiety.

- **Normalize the Anxiety:** Children benefit from hearing adults tell them that being afraid of the virus is OK to feel. Learning not to be scared to be a little anxious, helps children talk about their fears and create ways to deal with being afraid.
- **Use the "FEAR" Approach when Talking to Your Children:** The FEAR approach can help you organize how you talk to your children about their fears of COVID-19.
 - **Feelings:** Ask your children to verbalize how their fear of the virus feels with both a) feeling words (e.g., scary) and b) descriptions of physical sensations (e.g., my face gets hot, my hand get cold, my stomach hurts).
 - **Expecting Bad Things:** Have your children tell you their scary thoughts about the virus and what they fear will happen to them, you, or others they care about.
 - **Alternative Ideas/Action:** Ask your children to come up with other ways to think about COVID-19 (e.g., "It's a virus that I can protect myself from by wearing a mask.") and actions (e.g., "I'll wear a mask and wash my hands when I go outside of the house. I can protect myself!").
 - **Results/Rewards:** Have your children notice that you're not sick and neither are they. Remind them that wearing a mask and washing our hands is hard work, and find ways to reward doing that for them.
- **The Four Steps to Emotionally Coping:** Research from places like Seattle, done by Dr. John Gottman, show that four easy-to-do steps can help children bounce back from anxiety and learn life-long coping skills.
 - **Label the feeling:** Help your child create an emotional language. If they are afraid of COVID-19, help them use words like afraid. Using words for feelings at their age helps them think about their feelings rather than just feel them."
 - **See Your Parenting Opportunity:** Learn to think about strong feelings like fear of the virus as a chance to teach them to cope. If you find yourself unsettled by their fear, rethink their feelings as an opportunity to make them stronger, rather than just childish fears.
 - **Empathize:** Tell your children you understand their feelings and tell them a story about a time you felt the same way. This strategy gives them a connection to you and reduces their feelings of being different by virtue of their fear.
 - **Problem Solve:** Ask questions about how to handle the virus, and offer solutions like washing hands, social distancing, and keeping their hands away from their face. By turning strong emotions into problem statements, children learn that feelings are signals to do something positive to handle COVID's threat. In other words, they learn they are capable, rather than helpless.

Talk to your pediatrician if these tips don't help. Your doctor can refer your children to a behavioral health provider at CCBT if that next step is warranted.