



Teaching Your Kids About Fighting Against Anxiety

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Many children, even in Christian homes, fight significant battles with anxiety. Some children clearly articulate their worrying thoughts. Other children may have more subtle signs of an anxiety battle such as repetitive questions for reassurance, trouble falling asleep or physical symptoms such as stomachaches or headaches. Parents can be very helpful to their children by recognizing anxiety struggles and helping to equip their children to fight against anxiety. As you journey with your children through emotional bedtimes, anxious thoughts about dreaded events, tearful goodbyes or even intense times of panic, be empowered to know that you can make a lifelong impact as step by step you help to train your children to fight against anxiety by the power of God's Word. Here are some principles and strategies to help children to overcome destructive worrying thoughts.

- **Try to identify and address any root causes for anxiety**, such as a scary movie or an embarrassing or painful experience. If a root cause is not obvious, pray asking the Lord to reveal any specific cause. Reflect on the onset of when your child started having anxiety, including what was happening circumstantially to your child at the time.
- **Encourage your child to talk to God about his worries and trust in Him.** Remind him that no matter what he is feeling that God is in control, reigning supreme over every detail of the universe, and is always ready to help him. Remembering that God is in control helps to calm our hearts.
- **Meditate on God's Word.** Share Scriptures often about trusting in God and finding peace in Him. In your child's bedroom or play area, hang simple Bible verses (which your child could help to decorate). Teach your child about Jesus as his shepherd who protects him and holds him close. Empower your child to know that just as David stood up to the mean giant Goliath, he can stand up to his scary thoughts with God's power and defeat them. Comfort your child with images from Psalm 91, such as God sheltering him as a father bird protects his baby bird under his wing.
- **Teach your child that her value comes from being an extraordinary creation of God and help her establish her identity in Christ.** If your child believes her identity and purpose come from her performance or other external factors, this can lead to anxiety

about not measuring up or not having the approval of others. (Max Lucado's book *You are Special* conveys these truths for kids in a powerful way.)

- **Empower your child to know that she can CHOOSE what to think on.** Just because a thought pops in her head, it does not mean that she needs to dwell on it. Use everyday thought struggles as teaching opportunities to train your child what it means to “take captive” ungodly thoughts (2 Cor. 10:5) and choose true thoughts to keep thinking on (Phil 4:8). Similarly, while unpleasant feelings can just happen unbeckoned, it can be life-changing for a child to grasp that she can choose what emotions she embraces and allows to linger. Just like while looking out a window, she can focus on a smudge in the glass or the beauty beyond, we can choose what to focus on and do not need to live by the feelings or thoughts that come upon us.
- **Teach about switching from “downstairs brain” thinking to “upstairs brain” thinking.***
 - o Our first response to a potentially disturbing situation is often an automatic or reflexive worrying or negative response at our brainstem level. To a child, you might describe this as her “downstairs brain” (or “worry brain”) thoughts.
 - o When your child is facing irrational anxious or negative thought patterns, work to help her switch to true, rational thoughts, which you could describe to her as “upstairs brain” thoughts. This is referring to thinking from the frontal cortex where rational thought originates.
 - o If your child consistently seems trapped in her “downstairs brain” and you are not able to help her transition to “upstairs brain” thinking, consider professional Christian counseling.

*Analogy adapted from [The Whole-Brain Child](#) by Dan Siegel MD & Tina Bryson PhD

- **Distraction or redirection techniques can be helpful when your child is overwhelmed with anxiety (especially for young children).**

Ideas (which could be displayed on a poster for your child to choose from):

- o Take three breaths (like trying to blow out a candle)
 - o Blow bubbles
 - o Hug a stuffed animal (or a parent!)
 - o Exercises, such as jumping jacks or wall push-ups
 - o Take a drink
 - o Listen to music or dance
 - o Stretch
- **Come up with a plan together about saying “No!” to worry thoughts.** Some ideas are that your child picture himself:
 - o Taking the thoughts captive – picture locking the thoughts up in jail or capturing them
 - o Casting fears away like with a fishing pole (1 Peter 5:7)
 - o Holding up a stop sign
 - o Shaking head “no”
 - o Holding out hand in a “stop” gesture
 - o Imagine he is David with his slingshot and the thoughts are Goliath

- Talk to those thoughts like he would talk to a bully and tell them they are not welcome
- Stomp on the “ANTs” (can think of them as “Automatic Negative Thoughts”)

- **Replace worry thoughts with good and true thoughts.**

Ideas:

- Have a simple verse ready to say
 - Sing a verse song (check out *Seeds of Courage & Seeds of Faith* CDs)
 - Picture Jesus holding his hand (Isaiah 41:13)
 - Think about finding refuge in God
 - Sing a song of praise
 - Recall past successes over the fear or another time God helped him
 - Make a list of things he is thankful for
 - Remember a good memory (imagine being back at that moment and try to remember what was felt, smelled, heard, etc.)
- **Try deep breathing to help your child relax when he is worked up with anxiety.** Coach him in taking a deep breath and letting it out as slowly as he can. Then pause breathing for 3-5 counts and repeat deep breaths. There are many fun deep breathing ideas online for kids, such as a child imagines smelling hot cocoa as he breathes in and then pictures himself blowing on the hot cocoa as he breathes out. Another idea is to pretend to smell flowers while taking a deep breath in and then blow on a pretend dandelion while exhaling.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation can also be a helpful calming technique.** Part of the body’s natural response to stress or anxiety is for muscles to tense up. However, systematically tensing muscles followed by releasing the tension can lead to mental relaxation. To teach your child simple Progressive Muscle Relaxation, talk him through starting with tensing the muscles in his feet for a count of 4 and then relaxing while taking a deep breath. Then slowly work up through the legs, stomach, hands, arms, shoulders and face following the same procedure (see online for tutorial videos or “scripts” to follow).
- **Help your child identify physical signs of anxiety.** Stomachaches, headaches and sleep disturbance are commonly triggered by anxiety. Especially for older children, increased awareness of how anxiety affects the body can help in dealing with anxiety.
- **Teach your child to “grow” the right thoughts.** Like a plant, the thoughts that we “water” (by continuing to think about) will grow and the ones we say “no” to will wilt. (Consider as parents that continually explaining the specifics regarding why an irrational worry is nothing to be concerned about can actually help “water” the worry.)
- **If the source of the anxiety is not obvious, try to help your child identify specific anxious thoughts.** When your child gets anxious, ask him what he was thinking about right before he became anxious. Working through exercises in an anxiety workbook

(see below) may help identify specific areas of anxiety, especially for elementary-aged children.

- **Deal with any anxiety issues in your own life.** Part of your child's emotional training growing up involves observing parental responses, so be vigilant to not model anxiety. Especially when your child is feeling intensely worried, resist letting her distress overwhelm you. Let your child hear your calm, peaceful voice as you help guide her when anxious thoughts barrage her mind.
- **Consider counseling.** If your child continues to struggle significantly with anxiety despite your working with her at home, seeing a good professional Christian counselor can make a life-long difference. Also, consider seeing a counselor yourself if needed. 😊

RECOMMENDED BOOKS:

- Battlefield of the Mind for Kids by Joyce Meyers
- Captain Snout and the Power Questions: Don't Let the ANTs Steal Your Happiness by Daniel G. Amen MD
- Mind Coach: How to Teach Children & Teenagers to Think Positively & Feel Good by Daniel G. Amen MD
- I Bet I Won't Fret: A Workbook to Help Children with Generalized Anxiety Disorder by Timothy Sisemore PhD
- What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety by Dawn Huebner & Bonnie Matthews
- What to Do When Mistakes Make You Quake: A Kid's Guide to Accepting Imperfection by Claire Freeland & J. Toner

Note: Most of these books are from a secular perspective. Please review before sharing with your child to choose which sections may be helpful and appropriate.

SCRIPTURES FOR OVERCOMING ANXIETY

"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you." Psalm 56:3

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love and self-discipline." 2 Timothy 1:7

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." 1 Peter 5:7

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Philippians 4:4

"For I, the Lord, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I am the one who helps you.'" Isaiah 41:13

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28

"You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you." Isaiah 26:3

"We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." 2 Corinthians 10:5

"Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears."
Psalm 34:3-4

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." Philippians 4: 6-8