

Responding To Children's Anxiety



Anxiety is the body's natural response to stress. It is natural for fears to surface and intrude on our thoughts during stressful times. It is important to recognize when worries become persistent and invasive and to find ways to manage their intensity. We cannot fully eliminate anxiety. We can learn how to better manage it. Knowing yourself and your own emotional state can help you identify anxiety in your child.

The following is a list of possible signs of anxiety in your baby, toddler or preschooler. This is not an exhaustive list and many of the symptoms can be the same across ages.

Babies:

- ❖ Difficult to soothe
- ❖ Sleep/eating disturbances
- ❖ Excessive crying
- ❖ Withdrawn from caregiver
- ❖ Lack of eye contact
- ❖ Irritability

Toddlers:

- ❖ Regression in any or all areas
- ❖ Increased aggression/tantrums
- ❖ Rigidity
- ❖ Distractibility
- ❖ Excessive fears or worry
- ❖ Sleep/eating disturbances
- ❖ Increased clinginess or avoidance of caregiver

Preschoolers:

- ❖ Irritability
 - ❖ Somatic complaints
 - ❖ Repetitive behaviors
 - ❖ Aggressive play themes
 - ❖ Constant questioning- "when are we...?," "How many more minutes until...?" "what if...?"
 - ❖ New or increased fear
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Here are some anxiety-relieving strategies for you and your child to do together or independently of one another:

❖ 5-4-3-2-1: Look, Feel, Listen, Smell, Taste

This exercise will take you through your five senses so that you can try to stay in the present moment.

- ❖ Name animals alphabetically. For example: Armadillo, Butterfly, Cat, Deer. If you can not think of one just move one to the next letter.
- ❖ Imagine your favorite place and then describe it out loud, or draw/paint a picture of it.
- ❖ Deep breathing helps your body to return to a resting state. You can practice deep breathing with bubbles, pinwheels feathers, and also by placing a stuffed animal on your or your child's belly so you can watch it rise and fall.
- ❖ Exercise can help your body balance the cortisol that floods your system when struggling with anxiety. Both calm, slow movements and fast rhythmic movements can release anxiety. Pay attention to your body's signals to see how your body might like to move.
- ❖ Listening to calming music or a [podcast](#) can decrease the amount of sensory stimulation you're taking in. Listening allows for the opportunity to close your eyes and just focus on the sounds-decreasing sensory input.
- ❖ Engage in a soothing sensory activity such as a bath, playdough, finger painting.
- ❖ Listen to your child by getting on their level and allowing them to express their feelings without judgment. The best way to respond is to acknowledge their feelings, "I hear you. You're having big feelings right now." Offer a hug or snuggle if that's something your child enjoys.

Important Notes

If your child's behaviors are concerning, seek advice from your pediatrician. If you would like to speak to someone from the Early Years Project you can email us at eyp@riversidecc.org

Further Resources

- To help answer questions and navigate this time of uncertainty, from Zero to Three, click [here](#).
- For a comprehensive look at the way children experience Anxiety, via Child Mind Institute, click [here](#).
- For a respectful parenting approach on responding to anxiety by Janet Lansbury, click [here](#).

The Early Years Project is available for families of children five years old and under, living in Cambridge and Somerville, at no cost to you. During the Covid crisis, we are offering our services directly to parents rather than through childcare settings as we usually do. If you have concerns or questions about your child's needs, development, emotions, or behavior, or are having difficulty managing the stress of being a parent during this demanding time, please contact us at eyp@riversidecc.org or leave a message at 781-686-0435 to arrange for one our consultants to contact you. Our experienced child development and parenting specialists are here to support you by phone, video, email and can provide resources and referrals as needed. Please spread the word to families that you know in Cambridge and Somerville. We are a program of Riverside Community Care and are funded by the cities of Cambridge and Somerville.