



## **Children and Anxiety**

Anxiety can show up as avoidant, clingy behavior, or show itself as tantrums, meltdowns, and aggression. When children experience anxiety, they are driven by a brain on high alert and oftentimes don't realize why they are lashing out. Adults in their life who can understand this behavior as being anxious and not "bad" can help guide the child to a healthier, more effective way of responding to people/situations.

An anxious brain is one that is on high alert and overprotective. It clicks into the "flight or fight" mechanism even when there is no real threat. Since children are constantly learning new ways to deal with people and the world around them, this can trigger an anxious response.

Triggers could include:

- Unfamiliar people and places
- A playground scuffles
- Criticism
- Threat of failure or embarrassment
- Disappointment

### **What can cause anxiety in children?**

-Any situation that is new, unfamiliar, difficult, or stressful

### **What are signs/symptoms of children with anxiety?**

-upset stomach, clammy skin, racing heart, shakiness, vomiting, nail biting, headaches, avoidant behavior (if anxiety is coming out as angry behavior, the physical signs of anxiety will be present)

### **Ways you can help a child dealing with anxiety:**

#### ➤ **Explain where anxiety comes from**

-Let your child know that there's a part of their brain that acts as a "Super Hero"—ready to keep them safe. Sometimes this Hero springs into action even when it's not needed, because it wants to protect us. When this happens it can cause emotions to come up quickly—like a switch!—and this is why we feel angry, or like crying. This is ok because the brain is healthy! And there are things we can do to help let that Super Hero know we are okay.

#### ➤ **Practice breathing exercises and Mindfulness**

-Breathing is like a lullaby for the Super Hero part of your brain that is active. It helps your brain realize there is nothing to worry about. It takes practice, but the more you do it, the easier it will become to calm down. Box breathing is an exercise that allows you to count silently while you breathe—adding another layer of focus. Breathe in for 4 counts...hold your breath for 1 count...exhale for 4 counts...repeat. You could also find a favorite toy and use it as a breathing buddy! Place it on your belly while you do the box breathing exercise.

#### ➤ **Encourage powerful thoughts**

-Talk to the Super Hero part of your brain that is trying to keep you safe—out loud or silently—and let it know you're ok. Practice words like, "It's ok! We are safe here. You

can relax.” The more you practice being in control of your thoughts/emotions, the stronger this skill will become!

➤ **Name it to Tame it**

-A powerful way to bring calm when a child is in the midst of experiencing an emotion is to name the feeling. Something such as, “I can see you’re feeling angry right now. It has upset you that you cannot run in the store—I understand it is hard to sit still sometimes”. Providing an explanation helps strengthen the connection between the emotional and the factual halves of the brain and the emotions will begin to “tame”.

**\*\*Book recommendations for children with anxiety**

- Hey Warrior by: Karen Young
- When My Worries Get Too Big by: Karl Dunn Buron
- The Huge Bag of Worries by: Virginia Ironside