

# Parenting a Child or Teen with Anxiety

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## **CLASS TOPICS**

- Distinctions Between Clinical Anxiety & Anxiety Episodes
- Different Nervous System States
- Parent Self-Awareness
- Practicing Attunement & Co-Regulation as Powerful Parent Tools for Anxiety (and other emotions, too)
- Anxiety Tool Kit
- Common Pitfalls of Parenting a Child with Anxiety
- Scriptural Answers to Anxiety

### **Generalized Anxiety Disorder**

- The DSM 5-TR defines Generalized Anxiety Disorder as the following (in both children and adolescents):

1.Excessive anxiety and worry occurring more days than not for at least 6 months, about a number of events or activities (e.g., school performance, social interactions, sports, etc.

2.Difficulty controlling the worry.

3.The anxiety and worry are associated with three (or more) of the following six symptoms (with at least some symptoms present more days than not for the past 6 months):

.-Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge, Being easily fatigued, Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank, Irritability, Muscle tension, Sleep disturbances (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless, unsatisfying sleep)

Note: In children, only one of these symptoms is required for a diagnosis.

4. The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, academic, or other important areas of functioning.

5. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse or medication) or another medical condition (e.g., hyperthyroidism).

6. The disturbance is not better explained by another mental disorder

## **GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER & SITUATIONAL ANXIETY DISTINCTIONS**

- Most all children and adolescents experience some degree of situational anxiety or anxiety episodes as part of normal development and typical functioning.
- GAD: In both children and adolescents, GAD is characterized by chronic and persistent worry or anxiety. The excessive worry must occur more days than not for at least 6 months. It's ongoing and not limited to specific situations.
- Anxiety Episodes: These are typically short-term responses to specific situations or stressors. The anxiety might be intense but transient and usually subsides once the stressor is resolved or after a short period.
- GAD is chronic, pervasive, and harder to control, affecting a wide range of life areas, and causes significant distress and impairment in functioning.
- Anxiety episodes are situational, shorter-term, and typically triggered by specific events, with less long-term impact on overall functioning.

Counseling- If your child's anxiety persists for an extended time and is interfering with daily functioning, it is recommended that you seek counseling for your child and/or visit with your PCP. Medication may be an option but is not usually an initial treatment unless the anxiety is severe. Children and adolescents may be resistant to counseling but normalizing the initial discomfort of counseling can be helpful. Most children or teens who are resistant to counseling warm up to it relatively quickly.

## **OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM**

### **WE ARE FEARFULLY & WONDERFULLY MADE! Psalm 139:14**


Polyvagal Theory (by Stephen Porges, PhD) offers insight into how our nervous system constantly monitors our environment and influences our responses. The vagus nerve runs from the brain to the heart, lungs, and digestive system, and it controls how our body reacts to stress in an involuntary manner.

Polyvagal Theory explains that we have three basic nervous system states:

- The ventral vagal state, where we feel calm, connected, and safe/green zone
- The sympathetic state, where we feel "fight or flight" in response to perceived danger/yellow zone
- The dorsal vagal state, where we might shut down or disconnect in response to overwhelming stress/ red zone

This explains why individuals may react differently in various situations. For instance, feeling disconnected or zoned out during a high-stress event isn't a weakness—it's a nervous system response to overwhelm. How might this apply to your child? When is the last time that your child may have been in the yellow zone or red zone? Parents can help their child in the yellow or red zone by being a calming presence to help the child's nervous system regulate to a calmer state. When is the last time YOU have been in the yellow or red zone? Note that a healthy nervous system is fluid, bouncing between the green and yellow zones.

**WHICH STATE IS YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM IN?**



**SHUTTING DOWN**

**STRESSED OUT**

**STEADY**

**CHOOSE THE WORDS THAT DESCRIBE YOU**

- Collapsing
- Exhausted
- Overwhelmed
- Low energy
- Foggy
- Trapped
- Disconnected
- Alone
- Despairing
- Depressed
- Hopeless
- Helpless
- Numbing
- Ashamed
- Going through the motions
- Defensive
- Uneasy
- Heart racing
- Short of breath
- Tense
- Blaming
- Judging
- Negative thinking
- Worried
- Agitated
- Frustrated
- Rude
- Self-righteous
- Escaping
- Anxious
- Panicked
- Appealing
- Suppressing
- Safe
- At ease
- Present
- Strong
- Powerful
- Clear thinking
- Curious
- Logical
- Creative
- Engaged
- Productive
- Responsive
- Hopeful
- Loving
- Caring
- Playful
- Joyful
- Conscientious

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**Parent Self-Awareness-** It is important to know and understand ourselves when helping our children with fear, anxiety and actually ALL emotions. Curiosity about yourself on a daily basis can be a productive parenting tool:

1. What is my stress level today, 0-10?
2. Where is it showing up in my body?
3. What is my typical daily stress level?
4. What is my greatest fear as a parent? How might that influence HOW I parent? (this could contribute to an anxiety “feedback loop” between parents & kids).
5. What triggers me most as a parent?
6. What is my typical default when I am triggered with or by my children?
7. When do I feel the most overwhelmed as a parent?
8. How might I slow down my own nervous system when I feel emotionally activated?

“It is almost impossible for an escalated parent to de-escalate an escalated child.”  
Learning your own nervous system states and how to calm yourself when emotionally-activated is a great skill to model to your child or teen.

***Do you know what your child worries about the most? If you are unsure, asking your child to share and rank their worries might elicit an insightful discussion.***

### **Attunement and Co-Regulation as Powerful Parent Tools for Anxiety**

**Attunement** is being deeply aware of and responsive to another person's emotional state, needs, and nonverbal cues. It involves a caregiver or another person being "in tune" with someone, recognizing their emotional signals (even subtle ones) and responding appropriately in a way that makes the other person feel understood and connected. Attunement requires a high level of emotional presence, empathy, and sensitivity. Dan Siegel, MD authors excellent books about brain development and parenting. He discusses attending to the emotional brain before trying to engage the logical brain. When a child is upset, trying to engage and understand the child's emotional experience before advice-giving or trying to speak logic is critical and most effective. We sometimes forget that as parents. Watch "The Still Face" video on youtube for a powerful example of attunement and misattunement.

**Example:** If your adolescent comes home from school in a bad mood, instead of assuming they're being "difficult," you notice that their body language looks tense and their responses are short. By being attuned, you might say, "It seems like something is bothering you today. Do you want to talk about it?" This shows you're tuned in to their emotional state without pushing them, allowing them to feel safe to open up if they want to.

**Co-regulation** is about actively helping your child regulate their emotional state, especially in moments of heightened anxiety. Adolescents with anxiety often struggle with self-regulation, meaning they might feel overwhelmed by their emotions and not know how to calm themselves down. Pre-teens and teens with anxiety often present as defiant, agitated, and disrespectful. Your calm, grounded presence can help guide them back to a state of emotional balance.

**Example:** Spotting anxiety underneath defiance or resistance- personal example of morning stress. Using comfort instead of consequences. There may still be a time that consequences are needed to address the disrespect, but that discussion is usually not useful in the middle of the agitated state.

In pre-adolescence and adolescence it may be tricky to spot anxiety because it can be hidden by agitation and sometimes a defiant presentation. Also, the adolescent developmental need for independence can create a resistance to nurturing and physical affection. There are other ways to co-regulate with a teen: sitting together and listening to favorite music, or videos or movies, sending supportive texts, taking a walk, and politely listening and validating the child's experience, etc. Asking permission to give a hug (& honoring the response) is a respectful way to co-regulate. You can also ask your child what they need or if there is something you can do to help. Refrain from advice giving when your child is in an escalated state (or when anyone is for that matter!). :-)

## Anxiety Tool Kit

1. **Expressing Emotions-** Helping your child express emotions through various creative ways: journaling, drawing, other art forms, daily conversation check-ins, & regular family conversations promoting emotional intelligence.
2. **Parent-Child Time-** Intentional, no-phone/uninterrupted time with your child playing a game or simply relaxing together.
3. **Daily Meditation/ Deep Breathing-** 5 deep full breaths can reset the limbic system. We rarely do this in the busyness of life. Apps and online meditation resources like the “Abide” app (Christian-based). Other favorites are “Anxiety Relief Practice” on Youtube (12 minute video); “Guided Meditation for calming the mind” on Youtube (5 minutes). Make it a habit to relax and meditate with your anxious child- “Be Still & Know” with your child-very powerful.
4. **Physical activity-** is very beneficial to diffuse anxious energy in the body: walking, jogging, play & other forms of cardio with your child.
5. **Prayer, gratitude practices, and worship music** as parts of praise and soothing daily routines
6. **Sensory aids:** weighted blanket, fidget toys (& being aware of any sensory triggers-there are Sensory profile pdfs online-see an occupational therapist for an evaluation if you believe your child has sensory-related anxiety).
7. **Natural options-** “Rescue Remedy” Lozenges (Amazon & Natural Stores- check with your PCP/Pharmacist first)
8. **Have weekly downtime** in the family schedule- for real.
9. **Physical Wellness:** Includes sleep & nutrition. Take a look into nutritional influences on anxiety <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8706568/>; <https://www.bmj.com/content/384/bmj-2023-077310>

## Common Pitfalls of Parenting a Child with Anxiety

Finding the Balance of What is Needed Can be Difficult & Not “One Size Fits All”!

1. **Over-reassurance-** may reinforce anxiety instead of decrease it
2. **Avoidance of triggers/stressors-** avoidance takes away opportunity to work through triggers
3. **Overprotectiveness or micromanaging-** in an effort to “clear the path” instead of allowing the child to be independent and resourceful
4. **Dismissing or minimizing the anxiety-** the child may not feel understood or that their feelings are unimportant.
5. **Being triggered and reacting with frustration or impatience**
6. **Allowing inconsistent routines or boundaries-** in an effort to be flexible because of anxiety, a parent may overcorrect. Predictable boundaries are important and give children security.

## **Scriptural Answers to Anxiety**

- Throughout the Bible, God's people experienced fear, worry, stress and anxiety as a result of danger, difficult circumstances, uncertainty, and sometimes even their own choices. We have many examples of people who turned to God in times of stress and anxiety.
- Sometimes I believe we stop the conversation on anxiety too soon by simply saying, the Bible says "Don't be anxious." But what happens when we are? What happens when our children are?
- We may not be able to easily resolve our children's anxiety, but we can train them to turn to God in times of anxiety and stress. We can take our emotions (all of them) directly to God as David did in the Bible. Teaching our children that they can share anything with God is something we can certainly do. God attunes with us and co-regulates with us just as a loving father would do.
- Meditate on God's Presence in Our Lives (His co-regulation with us). Countless scriptures discuss that He will be with us and never leave us. We can offer our children that reassurance about God's presence. Our own presence can parallel that in their lives also. Offering encouraging statements about our Father in Heaven but also that "we as your parents will be with you in these anxious times; we will get through this together." God offers that same promise to us as His children.
- Praying with our children and helping them "hide the Word of God" in their heart regarding God's faithfulness and comfort when we are struggling is not a small thing!
- God's Presence Through Others: Christians often experience God's presence through the support of other believers. In Christian community, we are called to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). When other believers pray for us, offer encouragement, or provide comfort, they are acting as conduits of God's care, helping us to regulate emotionally. This communal co-regulation reinforces the idea that God is present with us through His body, the Church.

**Is there a specific time in your life where you have been anxious and turned to God?**

**What emotion do you have the most difficult time talking with God about?**

**Is it difficult to share your distress with a Christian friend when you are stressed or anxious?**

## Calming Scriptures

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

**"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6-7**

**"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Isaiah 41:10**

**"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" Psalm 34:18**

**"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea." Psalm 46:1-2**

**"Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." I Peter 5:7**

**"I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears." Psalm 34:4**

**"Cast your cares on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous be shaken." Psalm 55:22**

**"And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:19**

**"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30**

**"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" Romans 8:31-32**

**"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" Hebrews 13:5,6**

**"As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him." Psalm 103:13**

**"Your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Matthew 6:8**