



Seven ways to help an anxious child

[Hannah Dickson](#) spends an hour with [Diane Levy](#)

1. Accept logic isn't the answer

They learn that mum and dad are there when they need them and so the world is a safer place.

When our children are feeling worried about something, we often move straight into fix-it mode. Phrases such as, "Don't worry, it will never happen," or, "Go to sleep, we'll work it out in the morning," may sound very familiar.

"Our logical, practical Kiwi way is to problem solve," says Diane. "We do it with all the best will in the world, but it often doesn't work to lessen our children's anxiety. The problem is while we mean to reassure them, what we are doing is overriding their feelings." This doesn't work with anxious children because their natural fight-flight response has gone into overdrive. The logical side of their brain has been put on hold while the emotional part takes over. Until we have dealt with the feelings, logic won't help.

2. Avoid unhelpful labels

Another way we can unwittingly minimise our children's feelings is by giving them unhelpful labels. Saying, "You are such a little worrywart," or asking, "How did I get such a drama queen?" isn't helpful.

3. Don't jump to solutions

Try putting their feelings into words.

Quick fix solutions, like telling children to just walk away from the kids who are worrying them, or trying to tell them you have checked under the bed and there are definitely no monsters there, probably won't work until you have taken the time to listen, and show your child you understand.

4. Take the time to find out how they are feeling

Try to avoid asking ‘why’ questions. The, “Why are you worried?” question calls for complicated thinking and often our children can’t access that. Instead, put into words what they are feeling and use your tone of voice to match the strength of their feelings. “That’s really worrying you, isn’t it?”

While it may be tempting to use your very best counselling voice to calm them down, this can often give your child the impression that you don’t understand how bad it is for them. Diane reflects, “We need to match their intensity so they know mum and dad get it.”

5. It’s all about empathy

Sometimes our children don’t know what they are scared of, but they are grappling with a general sense of dread. “Imagine you are scared of something, but you don’t quite know what you are scared of. That’s a horrible feeling,” says Diane. “At this point, what they really need is our empathy.”

Until we have dealt with the feelings, logic won’t help.

Putting ourselves in their shoes and understanding what they are feeling means that our response is likely to be more in line with what they are going through, and needing from us. Try putting their feelings into words – “That’s a big worry for you, isn’t it? Your sore tummy is telling us that you are very worried and upset.”

As you talk to them, simultaneously wrap them in a big cuddle. If they need to suck their thumb and hold their teddy or blanket while you’re talking, that’s fine. The smell, touch, feel associations are calming in themselves. Once they are calm, they can start to think. “At this point, it’s a good idea to pause,” says Diane. “Sometimes, being very present is enough. They may walk away and find something to do, or settle down to sleep.”

6. After this, we can move onto the enquiry stage

Once their feelings are settled, we are in a position to start considering some actions. Try the following conversation starters. What are you worried might happen? Can we look at some things to try? Here are some ideas I have – what do you think of them? (This is a collaborative approach, rather than telling them what they need to do).

Give them confidence in their abilities and the reassurance that you are with them in thought – “Why don’t you try that tomorrow and I will ask how it went.” (Be sure to remember to follow up). Even if these ideas don’t lead to a long-term solution, they are all ways to get information on what to do next.

7. Something to try – a bravery box

“We need to match their intensity so they know mum and dad get it.”

This can be very helpful for little children who respond well to a bit of magical thinking. Put together a little box that holds a soft toy for comfort, a torch for checking dark corners (stock

up on plenty of batteries – you’ll probably need them!), and either a weapon or a wand – depending on their personality style. Checking the contents of the bravery box each night can work well as a calming ritual that helps allay their fears.

Our children live busy and, at times, complicated lives. In the busyness of family life it’s easy for feelings to get bumped to the bottom of our priorities as we deal with crowded schedules and lists of things that need to be done. But it’s really important that we take time to listen to our children and know what is going on with them.

Find a time that works for everyone – it may be when they come home from school, or it may be at bedtime. “Some days it’s hard to fit that in with all the tasks that need to be done, but it really is necessary,” says Diane. “If we deal with their little anxieties as they face them, we won’t have a child – or an adult – who needs to deal with generalised dread. Instead, they learn that mum and dad are there when they need them and so the world is a safer place.”

About Author



[Diane Levy](#)

Diane Levy is bestselling author of *Of Course I Love You, Now Go To Your Room!*, *They Look So Lovely When They're Asleep* and *Time Out for Tots, Teens and Everyone In Between*. She is an experienced and respected family therapist, counsellor and speaker. She has held workshops numerous times at The Parenting Place and is a regular contributor to *Parenting* magazine.

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