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Home Management Strategies for Social Anxiety Disorder

How to do it!

Step 1. Teaching your child about anxiety

This is a very important first step, as it helps children and teens understand what is happening to them when they experience anxiety. Let your child know that all the worries and physical feelings he or she is experiencing has a name: **Anxiety**. Help your child understand the **facts about anxiety**.

Fact 1: Anxiety is normal and adaptive as it helps us prepare for danger.

Fact 2: Anxiety can become a problem when our body tells us that there is danger when there is no real danger.

To learn how to explain this to your child, see [How to Talk to Your Child about Anxiety.](#)

Step 2: Teaching you child about social anxiety

- Explain to your child that sometimes we are afraid of being around other people or performing in front of others. These situations can make us feel like we are “on stage,” and we worry that we might do something embarrassing or that others will think badly of us. Let your child know that you will give him or her some tools to help cope with anxiety and gradually face his or her fears.
- Let your child know that social anxiety is fairly common, and they are not the only one who feels this way.

Step 3: Building Your Child’s Toolbox

You can help your child by giving him or her some tools to manage anxiety. These tools will help your child to accomplish the most important step – facing his or her fears. For Social Anxiety Disorder, tools in the toolbox include:

Tool #1: Learning to Relax.

One tool involves helping your child learn to relax. Two strategies can be particularly helpful:

1. Calm Breathing: This is a strategy that your child can use to calm down quickly. Explain to your child that we tend to breathe faster when we are anxious. This can make us feel dizzy and lightheaded, which can make us even more anxious. Calm breathing involves taking slow, regular breaths through your nose. For more information, see [Teaching Your Child Calm Breathing](#).

2. Muscle Relaxation: Another helpful strategy is to help your child learn to relax his or her body. This involves tensing various muscles and then relaxing them. You can also have your child use “the flop,” which involves imagining that he or she is a rag doll and relaxing the whole body at once. For more information, see [How to Do Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#).

Tool #2: Realistic Thinking

This strategy is aimed at **older children and teens**. Children with Social Anxiety Disorder often have negative thoughts about themselves and what will happen in social situations.

Common thoughts include:

- “No one will like me!”
- “What if I say something stupid?”
- “I’ll do something dumb and the other kids will laugh!”
- “I won’t know what to say.”
- “I’m not as smart/attractive as other kids.”
- “No one will talk to me.”

First, help your child identify these kinds of thoughts by asking your child what he or she thinks will happen in feared social situations. The next step is to help your child learn to challenge negative thoughts.

Questions teens can ask themselves:

- Am I 100% sure that _____ will happen?
- How many times has _____ happened?
- Is _____ really so important that my whole future depends on it?
- Does _____’s opinion reflect everyone else’s?
- Am I responsible for the entire conversation?
- What is the worst that could happen?
- What can I do to cope/handle this situation?
- Do I have to please everyone – is that even possible?

Here’s an example of how to help your child challenge worrisome thoughts.

Parent: I know you’re worried about giving the wrong answer in class, but how likely is that to happen?

Child: Well, sometimes I do know the answer. So, I guess it’s not that likely, but it could still happen.

Parent: What could you do if it did happen?

Child: I don’t know. Ugh, it would be so embarrassing!

Parent: Well...what could you tell yourself?

Child: I guess I could tell myself that people make mistakes and it’s not the end of the world.

Parent: I think it can help to remember that we all make mistakes. Have other students given the wrong answer?

Child: Yes.

Parent: And what happened?

Child: Um...Nothing I guess.

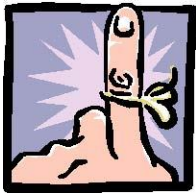
Parent: I have answered questions incorrectly and even said and done some pretty silly things (try and give an example). Do you think any less of me for this?

Child: No.

Parent: Sometimes it’s important to be able to laugh at some of the things we do. They make for great stories later!

You can help your child work through some of these questions, in order to challenge negative thinking. By doing this, your child will realize that some fears are unlikely to occur, and that he or she can cope in social situations.

For more information on helping your child identify and challenge scary thoughts, see [Realistic Thinking for Teens](#) or [Healthy Thinking for Young Children](#).



Helpful Tip:

Younger children may have a harder time identifying and challenging negative thoughts. However, they can benefit from coming up with some coping statements they can say to themselves to help them cope in social situations. For example, “I can try calm breathing to feel better” or “I just need to try my best.”

Tool #3: Making Coping Cards

It’s not easy to face fears, so it’s a good idea to develop “coping cards” that your child can carry around during the day to help manage anxiety. For some tips on how to help your child develop and use coping cards, see [Developing and Using Cognitive Coping Cards with Your Child](#).

Tool #4: Facing Fears

An important step in helping to manage social anxiety is to encourage your child to face situations that he or she has been avoiding because of social fears. Teens may benefit from being told that repeatedly facing feared situations reduces distress and helps build confidence. It is easier for your child to start with something that is less scary, and work up to situations and places that cause a great deal of anxiety. Working with your child, make a list of feared social situations (such as saying “hi” to a classmate, asking the teacher a question, or calling a friend on the phone). Once you have a list, arrange them from the least to the most scary.

Starting with the least scary situation, encourage your child to try it repeatedly (for example, saying “hi” to classmates at school every morning) until it is less scary. Once your child can enter that situation without experiencing much anxiety, move on to the next situation on the list. Socially anxious teens or children should practice three to five social tasks per day until they can do they perform them fairly comfortably, and then move on to slightly more challenging social tasks.

How to do these exercises:

It is important to prepare your child for the fact that he or she **will** feel anxious while doing this, but **that is normal!** When fighting back anxiety, it is normal to feel anxious, especially in the beginning. It is also very important to **praise** (e.g., “Great job!”) and **reward** (e.g., small inexpensive items, extra TV time, making a favorite dinner) your child for any successes, as well as any attempts at trying to face his or her fears. After all, it is hard work to face anxiety! For more information, see [Helping your Child to Face Fears: Exposure](#).

It is very important for your child to have opportunities to interact with peers and develop friendships. Help your child brainstorm ways to get involved with other children or teens. For example:

- Join a group (e.g., Scouts, Girl Guides)
- Play a sport (e.g., soccer, tennis, track and field)
- Join a club (e.g., chess club, fashion design club)
- Take a class (e.g., art, dance)
- Join the choir or band
- Help out with school play (e.g., prop team)
- Become a peer helper (help other students with homework)
- Take group lessons (e.g., swimming)

- Go to sports facilities (e.g., skate park)
- Plan short, frequent play dates or social activities with other kids

Tool #5: Developing and Broadening Social Skills

Children and teens with social anxiety may benefit from developing better social skills. There are several areas you can help your child work on.

- **Body Language:** This includes making eye contact, smiling, and facing people when talking to them.
- **Voice Quality:** This includes speaking clearly and at an appropriate volume and speed.
- **Conversation Skills:** This includes saying hello, and starting and keeping conversations going.
- **Friendship skills:** This includes asking others to do things with you, joining in on activities, offering help, and giving compliments.
- **Assertiveness:** This includes asking for help, saying “no”, and dealing with teasing and bullying.

A great way to have your child practice these skills is through role-play. Try modeling it first, and then encourage your child to try. For example, if your child wants to practice inviting friends over, you can pretend to ask your child over to play. Then have your child try it, while you pretend to be the friend.

Here’s an example of a role-play you can do with your child.

Parent: *Now, I’m going to pretend to be you, and you reply the way you think the other kid would answer. “Hey, what are you doing this weekend?”*

Child: *This is stupid!*

Parent: *Let’s just try it. “So, what are you doing this weekend?”*

Child: *“Not sure yet.”*

Parent: *“I was thinking of renting a movie on Saturday. Would you like to come over and watch it?”*

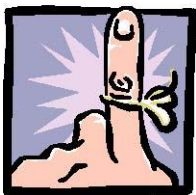
Child: *“Well, what movie?”*

Parent: *“I really like comedies. We can check out what new movies just came out on DVD.”*

Child: *“Well that sounds okay. I’ll check with my parents.”*

Parent: *Okay, how about we switch places and you try asking me?*

For more helpful strategies, see [Helping Your Anxious Child Make Friends](#)



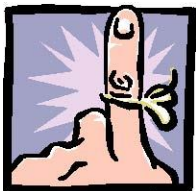
Helpful Tip:

Make sure that you help you child deal with any really problems such as bullying or learning disabilities that may be contributing to his or her social fears.

Step 4: Building on Bravery

Learning to manage anxiety takes hard work. If your child is doing better, then you both deserve credit! Learning to manage anxiety is like exercise – your child needs to “keep in shape” and practice his or her skills regularly. Make them a habit! This is true even after your child is feeling better and has reached his or her goals.

Don't be discouraged if your child starts using old behaviors. This can happen during stressful times or during transitions (for example, going back to school or moving). This is normal. It just means that your child needs to start practicing using the tools. Remember, coping with anxiety is a lifelong process.



Helpful Tip:

- **Exposure!** Expose your child to different social situations. Encourage him or her to play with others, attend birthday parties, and join-in after school activities.
- **Model!** Model for your child how to interact with others (for example, say “hi” to a stranger or start a conversation with a cashier at the grocery store).
- **Let Them Speak!** Don’t speak for your child. Encourage them to answer questions for themselves. For example, have them order food at a restaurant.
- **Get Perspective!** Encourage your child to take another perspective. Help him or her identify alternative interpretations of social interactions (for example: “Maybe John didn’t ask you to play ball because he didn’t think you would want to...why don’t you...”) or help your child cope when other children are teasing (for example: “They are being mean, just ignore them and play with other kids who are being nice”)
- **Praise!** Don’t forget to praise your child’s efforts!!!