

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR KIDS

Being a parent is one of the most complex and important roles on the planet.

Parents are a child's first and most important educators, yet they receive little or no training in what to do or how to do it. Unfortunately, children don't come with instruction manuals.

In this issue we will be talking about parenting strategies and ways to support children when they are feeling anxious or fearful. Anxiety is a normal part of life that many children will experience at some point growing up, especially as they come across new situations and experiences.

What are signs your child is feeling anxious?

Common anxieties can include:

- Social - the fear of interaction with other people or being the focus of attention
- Separation - when a child gets distressed without their parent
- Generalised - worrying about many areas of life including school, health, sporting achievements, money, schoolwork and/or safety.



What can I do to help my child?

If you notice your child is becoming anxious, these are some good steps to follow:

1. Be calm and reassuring in your words, voice and facial expression. You want them to feel you are 'on their side' not fighting against them, or standing behind them, pushing and prodding.
2. Gently acknowledge their fear - don't dismiss or ignore it. "It sounds like you're worried about going to school. Tell me what you're worried about."
3. Help them to express what they're really anxious about. For example "I'm sick, I don't think I can go to school tomorrow." "That's not like you to be sick. I know tomorrow is your first day at a new school. Is it possible that you're worried about going to a new school? That you don't know anyone and may not fit in?"
4. Invite them to think about ways they could manage their anxiety, for example, to remember that they made friends easily at their last school, at their sports club. You may decide to offer some practical support. "If I drove you to school would that help?"
5. Gently encourage them to do things they're anxious about - don't push them to if they don't want to.
6. Praise them for doing something they're anxious about, rather than criticising them for being afraid. Also, encourage them to acknowledge to themselves their sense of mastery and accomplishment. "Wow, that's fantastic that you did that even though you were not too sure about it. How does it feel to have done that?"
7. Avoid labelling your child as 'shy' or 'anxious.'

What can I do to help my child?

It can be difficult to know the line between being gently encouraging and pushy. If your child is concerned about participating in a certain activity break it down into smaller, more manageable components. Find out what your child is willing to try and let them know it will be ok with you, whether or not they manage to complete it.

Breaking the activity up into smaller time components can be helpful. For example, if it is a team game, encourage them to participate for 2 or 5 minutes. This can be extended as they gain confidence or if they are older. Let them know that they might feel proud of themselves for having a go, despite feeling anxious. Keep a timer on, to reassure the child, and to let them know when their participation time is up.

When should I become concerned?

Anxiety becomes a concern when it stops your child from doing things they want to do, or interferes with friendships, schoolwork or family life. It can also become a concern if your child's anxiety leads to unsettled sleep or seeming generally unhappy because they are worried a lot of the time.



Talking to your child about war and violence

ANZAC Day is one of the most significant events in our national calendar and is a time to commemorate the sacrifices made by Australian and New Zealand men and women during conflicts around the world.

You may find your children asking questions about the significance of ANZAC Day, or about other conflicts they may hear about on the news. With increasing coverage on social media, TV shows, video games or news coverage, issues involving violence, crime and war can reach even the youngest children and can cause lingering feeling of grief, trauma and fear due to this remote exposure. Having a plan to discuss these topics in an age-appropriate way can be important to maintaining their mental health.

War can be a difficult topic to approach with younger children and can be challenging to talk about. Certain stories can cause grief, stress and fear in children. If and when this occurs, it is important to encourage the child to talk about their fears, and to support them around these feelings.

The information parents give should depend on the questions children ask. If your children are asking questions about war and violence, explore what they think happens and ask them what they are worried about.

Talking to your child about war and violence tips:

- Discuss topics in an age appropriate way – try and avoid an information overload and only discuss what is necessary to soothe their fears.
- Balance the good news with the ‘bad’ news and try to emphasise the good outcomes. For example, in the case of war, the protection of country and keeping people safe.
- Acknowledge their thoughts and feelings and help them give a name to their feelings, gently and tentatively. Eg. “Are you sad, worried, mad, glad, concerned?”
- It is important for parent to have calm, relaxed persona so that the child feels safe to talk about their concerns. Ensure you offer good eye contact, and lots of hugs.
- Offer a solution. For example, “when you feel worried and scared, come and tell me.”
- Make sure you listen to their concerns and respond, rather than dismissing them.
- Be honest, direct and keep things simple.

