

Anxiety in Children and Teens

Quick summary

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal, helpful feeling that everyone has. It is our body's natural alarm system, going off when we feel in danger or when we think something bad might happen. It causes changes in our body that give a boost of energy and can help us respond to danger.

When is anxiety a problem?

Anxiety is a problem when it stops us from doing things we need to do (like participate in class) or want to do (like make new friends). It is a problem when we get too upset about normal situations (like speaking in public). Then anxiety is like a false alarm — not needed!

What leads to anxiety false alarms?

Avoiding normal situations that scare us causes more anxiety and false alarms. Avoiding keeps us from learning we can handle these situations.

How can kids and teens overcome high anxiety when it's getting in the way?

We can reduce anxiety about *normal, safe situations* by FACING FEARS. Some youth will need to learn new skills (like what to say or do) to be successful with their feared situations. Facing fears is also called "exposures" or "brave practice."

Facing fears of *normal, safe situations* helps youth learn:

- What they fear is actually not so likely
- What they fear is actually not so dangerous
- What they fear is something they can handle

Caregiver quiz

Are you falling into any of these common traps?

- ☐ **Rescuing:** Saving child from having to do the thing they feel anxious about (*Example: Ordering food for them at a restaurant.*)
- ☐ **Too much reassurance:** Repeatedly telling child something will or will not happen; never letting them deal with uncertainty or cope on their own. (*Example: Telling your child again and again that you will pick them up on time.*)
- ☐ **Overprotecting:** When parents provide too little independence, too much help, or go overboard trying to prevent bad outcomes or distress for their child. (*Example: Walking child inside to class when peers are independent.*)
- ☐ **Overly negative:** Teasing or making fun of your child for feeling anxious, or feeling so frustrated you shout at them. (*Example: "Stop being a baby."*)

Parent and caregiver help can backfire...

Helping kids avoid normal, safe situations they are afraid of is called "accommodation."

Helping kids avoid fears is understandable because it's hard to see kids upset. Accommodation sometimes helps kids face fears. (*Example: Your child will go to a birthday party if you stay there with them.*)

But over time accommodation keeps anxiety going! It prevents your child from learning their fears are unlikely to come true, or they can handle anxious feelings and hard situations.

Make a plan for brave practice

1. **What are safe situations that make your child or teen anxious that they most need to learn to handle?** List one.
2. **List some steps your child or teen could take to face this fear.** Try to think of easy steps and harder steps. This could include facing fears together with you or on their own. It could also include caregivers/parents stopping things they do that lets kids avoid their fears. Starting small makes it easier. Doing harder things leads to faster improvement. Find ideas in the workbook using the QR code below.
3. **List some small rewards you can give your child or teen when they face their fears.** These could be praise, privileges, prizes or treats that are motivating.

Write your ideas here

Tips for facing fears

Expect anxiety! Your child should feel anxious when facing fears. That is part of learning.

Build up: Start with a smaller, easier step if you're getting pushback or it's seeming too hard.

Validate: Use words to show you understand how they feel: *"I get that this is hard for you."*

Encourage with confidence: Tell (and show) them you know they can do hard things: *"I know it's hard and I know you can do this!" "I love you too much to keep helping you avoid."*

Ask questions after facing fears to help their success sink in: *"What did you learn?" "How was that different from what you expected?"*

Reward brave behavior: Use rewards to motivate and celebrate facing fears (it is hard!). Try a daily reward for daily practice.

Model: Use your own actions to show your kids how to face fears even in the face of anxiety. Face fears with them!

Manage your own distress: It's hard to watch your child's distress. Remind yourself: *"They can do this. Avoiding what they fear isn't helping them in the long run."*

Keep practicing! Make sure kids practice more than once. It can sometimes take daily practice facing a fear for kids to begin to feel more confident.

Scan for
video-guided
workbook



Scan the QR code to check out the video-guided FAST-A workbook. It includes lots of brave practice ideas and examples.

If you need more support, ask your child's primary care provider about finding a mental health provider.