

WHEN WORRY GETS LOUD

Helping kids face anxiety with confidence, connection, and practice.

01

NOTICE

The worry

02

PAUSE

The rescue

03

PRACTICE

The next step

Real-life scenarios • Parent scripts • Fear ladders • Reducing accommodations • A plain-English dictionary

A practical companion for families navigating everyday childhood anxiety, fears, and uncertainty.

Your child's alarm system

Anxiety is part of being human. The challenge comes when the alarm is louder than the situation calls for.

BRAIN BASICS

The brain makes predictions

Think of anxiety as a smoke alarm: it is designed to warn us about possible danger. Sometimes it goes off for burnt toast instead of a fire. The feelings are real even when the prediction is mistaken.

The alarm

A thought pops up: "What if I get lost?" The brain sends a warning signal. Heartbeat, stomach, muscles, and attention can all change.

The thinking-and-learning system

With support and experience, a child can learn: "I feel nervous, and I can still ask for directions, try something new, or solve a problem."

IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

Feeling unsafe is not always being unsafe

A child may feel genuinely frightened during a routine transition, speaking in class, or being apart from a parent. We take the feeling seriously while checking the actual situation and supporting a safe next step.

Our aim is not a child who never feels anxious. It is a child who can do more of life while anxiety comes and goes.

The worry loop

Why answering the question—or avoiding the situation—can make sense now, but keep the worry coming back.

01 1. TRIGGER

A new activity, bedtime, a test, or an unexpected change.

02 2. PREDICTION

“What if something goes wrong?” or “What if I cannot handle it?”

03 3. ALARM

Tears, repeated questions, stomachaches, anger, or freezing.

04 4. QUICK RELIEF

An adult reassures, checks again, changes the plan, or helps the child avoid.

05 5. THE LESSON

Relief arrives—but the brain may learn that reassurance or avoidance was necessary.

The short-term relief is understandable. The long-term skill is learning: “I can handle not knowing for sure.”

Comfort or reassurance?

Both come from love. The difference is what the child is learning over time.

Comfort + connection

"I see this is hard. I am here with you." It names the feeling, offers steadiness, and does not promise certainty.

Reassurance loop

"Are you sure? Really sure? Promise?" Answers briefly settle anxiety, but the same question soon returns.

SCENARIO / BEFORE SCHOOL

"What if nobody likes my presentation?"

Common response: "Everyone will like it. You will be perfect."

More useful: "You might feel nervous. You have practiced. You can get through a hard moment even if it is not perfect."

SCENARIO / A REPEATED QUESTION

"Are you definitely picking me up?"

First time: Give the real plan clearly.

When asked again: "We went over our plan. Sounds like worry wants another answer. What can you do while that unsure feeling is here?"

Provide accurate information and genuine safety support. Practice limiting only the extra reassurance that keeps the cycle going.

What is exposure practice?

Exposure-based CBT helps children gradually approach safe, age-appropriate situations they fear.

ERP / THE TWO PARTS

Approach + a different response

Exposure: Practice the feared or uncertain situation in small, planned steps.

Response prevention: Practice not doing the extra checking, avoiding, reassurance seeking, or “make it just right” behavior that keeps the alarm in charge.

The goal is learning

“I can feel anxious and still act.” It is not about forcing anxiety to disappear. Courage and flexibility can grow before comfort arrives.

What good practice looks like

Chosen collaboratively, predictable enough to feel supported, challenging enough to learn, repeatable, and never a test or punishment.

EXAMPLE / SOCIAL WORRY

A child fears talking to unfamiliar people

Start by saying hello with a parent nearby. Later, ask a store clerk a simple question. Eventually, try a short conversation with less help. The child may still feel nervous at each step.

Exposure is for situations that are objectively safe and appropriate—not for actual danger, bullying, unsafe environments, or unmanaged medical concerns.

Build a bravery ladder

Pick one real-world goal, then break it into small practice steps. The numbers are examples, not a test.

EXAMPLE GOAL / JOIN AN UNFAMILIAR ACTIVITY

1

Read the schedule together

2/10

2

Visit the entrance with a parent

3/10

3

Say hello to the leader with parent nearby

4/10

4

Stay for the first few minutes; parent steps back

5/10

5

Join a short portion with less parent involvement

6/10

6

Participate in the session; reconnect afterward

7/10

HOW TO USE IT

Let the child help choose the starting point

Practice a manageable step several times. Reflect on what they learned, not whether they felt calm. If a step is too big, make it smaller. If it becomes easy, gently stretch it.

Help without doing it for them

Accommodation means changing what the family does to prevent or quickly reduce a child's anxiety. Some support is necessary; some can gradually shift.

A SAMPLE SUPPORT TO INDEPENDENCE HIERARCHY

01 / FULL SUPPORT

Parent completes the scary task for the child.

02 / SHARED TASK

Parent and child complete it together.

03 / CLOSE SUPPORT

Child leads while parent stays nearby.

04 / DISTANT SUPPORT

Child tries; parent is available if truly needed.

05 / INDEPENDENT TRY

Child acts independently; parent celebrates the effort afterward.

PARENT REMINDER

Do not withdraw support suddenly

Agree on a specific small change, explain it in advance, and keep warmth and connection. Distinguish extra anxiety-driven help from disability-related, sensory, developmental, or genuine safety supports.

Five moments, five responses

These are starting points—not lines you must deliver perfectly.

BEDTIME / “STAY UNTIL I FALL ASLEEP.”

“I know nighttime feels hard. I’ll sit with you for five minutes, then check in as planned. You can practice settling while I’m nearby.”

NEW EXPERIENCE / “TELL ME EVERY DETAIL.”

“Here’s what we know, and here’s what we don’t know yet. We can make a plan for what you’ll do if something surprises you.”

SCHOOL / “WHAT IF I MAKE A MISTAKE?”

“You might. Everyone does sometimes. What could you do if you make one?”

SPECIFIC FEAR / “THERE MIGHT BE BUGS OUTSIDE.”

“We’ll use sensible bug safety. Then let’s try five minutes outside and see what you notice.”

JUST-RIGHT FEELING / “REDO IT AGAIN.”

“It feels unfinished. We’ve done our planned check. Let’s practice moving on with that feeling still there.”

The practical toolkit

Think small, stay collaborative, and track behaviors—not only feelings.

Before the moment

Name the goal together. Explain what will happen. Choose a manageable challenge and decide what support will remain.

During the moment

Use a calm, brief response. Validate discomfort. Invite one next action. Avoid debating every frightening “what if.”

After the moment

Ask “What did you learn?” rather than “Were you scared?” Notice initiative, flexibility, recovery, and time spent worrying.

When it goes sideways

Pause, reconnect, consider fatigue or sensory overload, and adjust the step. A rough attempt is information, not failure.

TINY WEEKLY TRACKER

Choose just one thing to notice

Situation: _____

One brave action: _____

Extra help we reduced: _____

What our child learned: _____

Progress can look like fewer repeated questions, a shorter buildup, trying despite worry, or recovering more quickly—not “zero anxiety.”

A few useful words

You do not have to memorize these. They simply give families a shared language.

Anticipatory anxiety

Worry that builds before something happens.

Avoidance

Not doing something to get away from an anxious feeling.

Accommodation

Changing a routine or taking over a task to reduce a child's anxiety.

Reassurance seeking

Repeatedly asking for certainty or confirmation.

Fear ladder / hierarchy

A list of manageable practice steps, from easier to harder.

Exposure

Purposefully approaching a safe, feared situation in planned steps.

Response prevention

Practicing a different response instead of the usual anxiety-relieving ritual.

Uncertainty tolerance

Learning that we can act without knowing exactly how everything will go.

Remember: The goal is to support the child, not the worry. You can be warm, consistent, and confident while your child learns to do hard things.