

# Expert Tools for Successfully Managing Kids' Anxiety: A Guide for Parents

Practical tools to move your child from anxious to calm in minutes.



This week's **Parenting Toolbox newsletter** focuses on a significant issue: **childhood anxiety**. It's a concern I'm regularly asked to address and one that parents (and teachers) need considerable support with.

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Anxiety is contagious.

When your child becomes anxious, you can easily feel anxious too.

Like the common cold, anxiety is catching, unless you take some precautions.

In this article, I'll show you two frameworks that work simultaneously when your child experiences an anxious moment. First, the **SOBER** framework, which focuses on you as a parent, is a precautionary approach. Second - the **Anxiety Response Plan** - will show you how to respond when your child is anxious.

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## Stay **SOBER** when your child is anxious

Yes, I know, I know.

You should always be sober when your child is anxious. But that's not the sober I'm referring to, although it makes a cool acronym.

It's easy for stress to get in the way when your child is anxious, so it helps to adhere to the **SOBER** acronym.

### **Stop**

Multi-tasking is a big part of the parenting gig, but when your child is anxious, they need your full attention. So, stop what you're doing and focus on your child.

### **Observe**

Shift to observer mode and see what your child is doing and saying. *What do you notice? Are they edgy, hanging back or impatient? What are you feeling?* Broaden your view to what's happening around you? This will help **ground you in what's essential**.

### **Breathe**

Breathing deeply will dial down your fight-or-flight response (initiated by your child's anxiety) and activate your relaxation response.

A few deep belly breaths are all it takes.

### **Expand**

Are you now ready to broaden your awareness of the possibilities in the moment? Is this the best time and place to discuss this issue?

If not, let your child know that you will get back to them as soon as you can. If you can manage this, consider your options.

### **Respond**

The previous five steps have ensured that you don't emotionally react to your child's anxious moment. Usually, that's meant to reassure them, fix the problem, or just hope it goes away. You are now ready to respond. The first words to leave your lips should be:

**"I get it!"**

This is the **empathetic** response.

Kids want their parents to understand that they feel anxious, nervous, or fearful. You might not grasp the reasons why, but you need to realise that their feelings are genuine, which helps them feel safe.

If you don't know what to say, simply start by saying, "I'm so glad you told me."

It may take some time to put these thinking skills into practice when you're responding to your child's anxiety. That's fine. These are stressful situations, so it's hard to be rational.

Eventually, it will become automatic as you practise the **SOBER** response

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## Your Anxiety Response Plan



Knowing in advance how you want to respond to a child who is panicking or becoming overly anxious is beneficial. As you read the following paragraphs, consider how they might relate to your child and how you would respond

### 1. Recognise your child's anxiety

The hardest part is recognising a child's anxiety or panic. It's helpful to know the situations that are likely to cause anxiety. If tackling new subjects at school has caused anxiety in the past, it's no surprise that they may be hesitant to go to school at the start of the year.

It's also helpful to understand how your child's anxiety typically manifests—whether through anger, tears, avoidance, or sullen behaviour. **Recognition becomes easier as you get better at tuning into your child's wavelength.**

### 2. Validate how they feel

Above all, kids want someone to understand their anxiety. You don't have to fix the problem, but it's important to show that you understand they're feeling anxious. **Match your response to theirs.** If they're really upset, speak with an energy and tone just below theirs, then gradually lower your energy and tone. This will help to calm their emotional response.

It's also a great way to help your child develop a more nuanced vocabulary.

An **"Ahhhh" statement** is a brilliant way to validate how your child is feeling.

*"Ahhh, you're feeling anxious right now....."*

*"Ahhh, you're having one of this "I might mess up" thoughts...."*

*"Ahhh, you're feeling nervous about tomorrow's....."*

### 3. Prompt deep, slow breathing

Encourage your child to take deep, slow belly breaths to help lower their emotional levels.

If deep breathing is new to them, **breathe together at a steady pace.**

Deep breathing is the quickest way to activate your child's relaxation response and calm them down.

### 4. Bring their attention back to the present

An anxious child's thoughts are always focused on the future. They worry about what may happen. It's essential to redirect your child's attention to the present. The easiest way to do this is through engaging the senses.

Ask your child to name five things they can see, then four things they can hear, and finally three things they physically feel (e.g. the wind on their face).

**This simple mindfulness exercise should be the key tool in your mental health toolkit, positioned right at the top of your deep breathing techniques.**

### 5. Guide them to take action that matters

When your child or teenager has calmed down, steer them towards the action that matters. If it's a test at school that's led to the anxious moment, then help your child make plans to tackle the test as best they can. Talk through how they can prepare. Remind them about what's important - doing your best, playing with friends, enjoying sport—processes rather than results.

Do everything you can to relieve the pressure and stress in a situation, but **don't let avoidance be the default option.**

### A word about tolerating discomfort



Although not a standalone step in your Anxiety Response Plan, helping your anxious child to cope with their discomfort is an approach you can weave into your validation of their experience of anxiety.

Tolerating discomfort means being prepared to sit with **uncomfortable or emotionally painful feelings**.

Consider discomfort as a muscle that grows stronger through training. Opportunities arise frequently, such as when a child is:

- **feeling hungry**
- **wanting something they can't have**
- **having to wrap up screentime**
- **contributing to household chores**

Tolerating discomfort doesn't mean just toughing it out. It's about teaching an anxious child to notice how they're feeling, how to name their emotions, and to practise acceptance of those feelings in the moment, all while knowing that a warm and comforting parent lovingly supports them.

Couple tolerating discomfort with social rewards (such as praise or a shared fun activity) for coping behaviours, and you're helping strengthen genuine resilience.

### **Finally...**

Anxious kids often need help making the metaphorical step back to see the bigger picture. They need someone to assist them in perceiving things as they are, rather than through the clouded lens of anxiety.

As you gain a clear understanding of what's happening in the moment with your anxious child, part of your role will be to consider what is hindering their progress, assist them in lightening the burden that may weigh them down, and encourage them to approach life **one step** at a time.