

Managing Anxiety In Children

Anxiety in children is on the increase. And, one of the main inhibitors of children learning well, and having general health and well being, is prolonged chronic stress and anxiety.

Eric Jensen, in the book "Enriching the Brain", believes that there is up to a 50% reduction in neurone development within a week of a major stress event. He also believes that the existing neurones wither with continued chronic stress. This has enormous implications for children and their learning, both at home and at school. Many small stressors can have the same impact as one large one, such as the death of a loved one, a divorce or moving school, town or country.

One of the best ways to manage anxiety in children, and to prevent it from arising, is by calming our children's lives. Busy parents who have poor stress regulating systems often contribute to the increased levels of stress and anxiety in children. Children depend on parents and other significant carers to help them develop healthy stress regulating systems so they can manage stress and anxiety. The key is to do this sooner, rather than later.

SIMPLE THINGS TO CALM CHILDREN'S LIVES AND REDUCE THEIR STRESS AND ANXIETY.

1. Slow down.

Slow down, walk slower, talk slower, do less. Avoid being rushed and hurried. What can you take out of your life so that you can be a calmer parent? This is especially important in the early years – avoid wearing too many hats when your children are young. Children sense their parents' stress and anxiety and react to it – reduce your stress. Avoid pressuring your children. Allow 15 minutes more than you think you need to get your children ready for a scheduled event like going to school.

2. Soothe more.

Remember that brain chemicals flood our children's brains quite irrationally and chaotically. Research shows that if a child's need for comfort is not met with emotional responsiveness and soothing, this system can, over time, become wired for bodily hyperarousal. This can make life a stressful and exhaustive affair. Reassure children that they are valued and safe and that mistakes and accidents are normal. Soothing and reassuring children triggers the release of oxytocin and calms them. Research shows clearly those children who were soothed quickly as babies tend to become self-soothers later. The more children experience love and affection, calm surroundings, a safe nurturing touch and predictable routines, the better chance they have of growing the neural wiring that will allow them to be happy and psychologically strong for life.

3. Create safety.

Is your home child friendly? Can your children relax sometimes without your home having to look like it's a feature house in a House and Garden magazine? Is there somewhere for introverted children to hide from people and the world to fill their energy cup? Homes that consciously create calm and quiet times

will help children feel safe, allow them to enjoy their own quiet company, and lower the stress levels within their growing bodies.

4. Reduce exposure to the television.

Overstimulation from too much activity, too many toys and too much talking can also cause children to become anxious. Avoid too much noise and visual stimulation at home. Over exposure to TV and computer screens is over stimulating many little minds and bodies. I recently read Bruce Lipton's book on the "Biology of Belief". In this book he wrote that the brains of babies and toddlers download everything they hear and see from TV – even when they are asleep in the room or they may appear to not be paying attention. That means all the violent images and sound bites of stories on the news and other adult programs are downloaded into their memory banks – and because they are so vulnerable, it causes them to skew the way they see the world. Please avoid TV as much as possible in the early years and then be very vigilant over what programs your child's sensitive minds watch or are exposed to.

5. Allow quiet.

Keep your noise levels down in the home – voices, radios and the volume on the TV. Have regular quiet times in your home when all electronic stuff is turned off. Children benefit from calm, quiet spaces in their world. Use quiet voices with gentle tones. Allow children time just 'to be' and to not always be busy. Calmness can be learned – do a relaxation activity with them. Teach them to take deep breaths and sigh. Teach them relaxation by using calming CDs.

6. Encourage routines and consistent patterns of family routine.

Avoid too much significant change in children's lives. Children need routines and consistent patterns of family routine to feel safe. They need time to exist, explore and process the world on their own terms. Research shows that social dislocation and change can be highly stressful for individuals especially children. Moving preschools, schools, homes or countries may contribute to a retardation or delay in some children's intellectual, social and emotional growth. If children are constantly changing homes, nannies, bedrooms, cultures, weather patterns and routines – and if they have poor sleep and unhealthy foods – meltdowns will occur from stress and anxiety.

7. Encourage play.

It helps children to play with other children, and to make friends. This allows their nervous system to relax rather than always being flooded with the stress chemicals cortisol or adrenaline, or both. Distress can cause long-term damage to the brain's adaptive systems and play is crucial for resilient behaviour like decision making, reflection and flexible thinking. Studies clearly link distress with lowered cognitive capacity.

Yoga, creative visualization and lots of time spent in nature all help soothe sensitive nervous systems. They are also fabulous for stressed parents as well! So start now, breathe gently and relax.