

ANXIETY

CONVERSATION GUIDE ...for parents of Preschoolers

It's very common for preschoolers to experience varying levels of anxiety. At this age, children are afraid of all kinds of things, but typically lack the cognitive skills to fear the abstract (failure, rejection, etc.), and instead worry about concrete things like dogs, noises, and the weather.

WHAT THEY'RE ANXIOUS ABOUT

Babies and toddlers generally fear separation; loud noises; sensory overload; "stranger danger" when new people are around; people in costumes. The most common fears for preschoolers ages 3-4 are fantasy characters like monsters and witches, the dark, and new noises.

Even young children can experience the physical symptoms that come with anxiety: tummy aches, a racing heart, or even trembling. They can also stomp their feet, bite other kids, or throw a temper tantrum in the middle of the grocery store.

Though their fears may not be founded in reality (*"There's a two-headed monster in my closet!"*), what they're feeling is reality for your concrete-thinking preschooler. But experiencing a certain amount of stress is important for your preschooler to experience in order to develop the coping skills necessary to manage anxiety in the future.

TIPS TO HELP THEM NAVIGATE

Here are some tips to help your preschooler confront their fears while still protecting their trust in and relationship with you.

1. Help your preschooler confront their fears . . . slowly.

Pushing your preschooler to face their fears is a good way to help them overcome them—but we have to be careful not to push them too hard or too fast. Help your child get used to experiencing the things that give them anxiety in small, measured doses.

If your child experiences separation anxiety, try having a sitter come to your house for a small increment of time. Maybe even stay in the house, but not in the same room. Show your child that parents do come back, even if he or she can't see them for a short period of time.

2. Explain things . . . but use words they can understand.

Instead of giving in to your child's fears or becoming frustrated, try explaining a potentially fearful situation prior to your child encountering it. Even if they can't understand everything you're saying, they will pick up on the soothing tone of your voice and see that you're not worried or afraid.

Say things like:

"I know the hand dryer is loud. That scares you a little, doesn't it? But did you know the hand dryer helps people keep their hands clean and dry? If you want to try it, you can. If not, maybe you can try it next time!"

"Mommy is going to have coffee with a friend. Miss Maria is going to come play with you. When Mommy is done having coffee, I'm going to come home and you can tell me everything you did while I was gone!"

3. Give them tools to fight their fears.

The next time your preschooler expresses a fear or worry, help them redirect or replace their thoughts. For example, if your child expresses concern about a monster in their closet, avoid any follow-up actions that reinforce monsters exist. Instead help them redirect their thoughts.

Say things like:

Close your eyes. Imagine something really fun, like your last birthday party.
What were your favorite things about it?
How does it make you feel after thinking happy thoughts? Better, right?
You can choose what you think about—choose things that are way more fun to think about than monsters!

4. Make it personal.

Our children are always watching us. They observe how we react in different situations—especially in situations where we're under a large amount of pressure and stress. It's important for you (as a parent *and* for your own well-being) to be intentional about caring for yourself when it comes to your own anxiety.

Make sure you have someone you can open up to honestly about your own fears and concerns. And, if necessary, consult the help of a ministry leader or professional.

5. Widen the circle.

Only you know your child, but if he or she exhibits more serious behaviors, then it may be time to reach out to a professional. Keep in mind that some children are more prone to anxiety than others. If your child's anxiety is preventing them from having an overall happy life, if they're unable to leave the house or play with other children, consult with your pediatrician or a licensed counselor.

Seeking professional help isn't a sign of failure as a parent. It makes you a good parent when you realize your child sometimes needs more than you are able to give.