

What to Say to Help an Anxious Child Calm Down

- **“I am here; you are safe.”** Anxiety has a way of making things look worse and feel scarier than when we are not feeling worried. These words can offer comfort and safety when your child is feeling out of control, especially if they are at the height of their worry. If you’re not sure what to say, this is an excellent go-to phrase!
- **“Tell me about it.”** Give your child room to talk about their fears without interrupting. Some children need to have time to process through their thoughts. Do not offer solutions or try to fix it. Children sometimes do better with a set amount of time: “Let’s talk about your worries for 10 minutes.”
- **“How big is your worry?”** Help your child verbalize the size of their worry and give you an accurate picture of how it feels to them. They can represent their worry by using arm length (hands close together or arms stretched wide apart) or by drawing three circles on a paper (small, medium and large) and choosing the one that applies.
- **“What do you want to tell your worry?”** Explain to your child that worry is like an annoying “worry bug” that hangs around telling them to be worried. Create a few phrases, then give them permission to talk back to this “worry bug.” They can even be bossy: “Go away!” or “I don’t have to listen to you!” Use silly voices, and try it loud and quiet.
- **“Can you draw it?”** Many kids cannot express their emotions with words. Encourage them to draw, paint or create their worries on paper. When they are finished, make observations, and give them a chance to explain the significance: “That’s a lot of blue!”
- **“Let’s change the ending.”** Anxious children often feel stuck in the same pattern without a way out. Help them see different options by telling their story, but leaving off the ending. Then, create a few new endings. Some can be silly, but at least one should be realistic for your child. Focus on your child conquering their fears with confidence!
- **“What other things do you know about (fill in the blank)?”** Some children feel empowered when they have more information about their fear (especially things like tornadoes, bees, elevators, etc.). Grab a book from the library, do a science experiment, research together online: How often does your fear happen? How do people stay safe?
- **“Which calming strategy do you want to use?”** Work proactively to create a long list of calming strategies your child enjoys. Practice them during the day, at random times when your child feels calm. When your child feels a worry sneaking into their thoughts, encourage them to pick something from the list.
- **“I’m going to take a deep breath.”** Sometimes our children are so worried that they resist our encouragement to pick a calming strategy. In this case, use yourself as the calming skill! Verbalize what you are doing and how it makes you feel. Some people hold their children close so they can feel the rise and fall of their chest as they breathe.
- **“It’s scary AND...”** Acknowledge your child’s fear without making it even more frightening by using the word “AND.” After the word “and” you can add phrases like, “You are safe.” or “You’ve conquered this fear before.” or “You have a plan.” This models an internal dialogue your child can use next time they are feeling worried.

- **“I can’t wait to hear about…”** It’s hard to see our kids suffer with worry. Many parents rush in to rescue their child from an anxiety-producing situation. Encourage your child that they will survive this difficult feeling by bringing up a topic to talk about when you’re together later — what they did at recess, who they sat by at lunch, etc.
- **“What do you need from me?”** Instead of assuming that you know what your child needs, give them an opportunity to tell you what would help. Older kids may be able to verbalize if they need you to listen, give a hug, or help them find a solution. If you can’t do it, give them their wish in fantasy: “I wish grown-ups could go to kindergarten too!”
- **“This feeling will pass.”** This may be a phrase you can both use when your child is at the height of panic. All feelings pass eventually. It often feels like they will never end, you won’t make it through, or it’s too hard. And that’s OK. Don’t let your brain get stuck in that moment; focus on the relief that is on the horizon.

Anxiety and worry look different for every child. Not every one of these strategies will work for your kids. You are the expert on your child. If you try something and it makes their worries worse, don’t panic. Just pick something else from the list to try next time. Eventually, you will find a few phrases that are effective for sending a calm, encouraging and empowering message to your child.