

Phrases to Calm an Anxious Child

It happens to every child in one form or another - anxiety. As parents, we would like to shield our children from life's anxious moments, but navigating anxiety is an essential life skill that will serve them in the years to come. In the heat of the moment, try these simple phrases to help your child identify, accept, and work through their anxious moments.

1. "I love you. You are safe."

Being told that you will be kept safe by the person you love the most is a powerful affirmation. Remember, anxiety makes your children feel as if their minds and bodies are in danger. Repeating they are safe can soothe the nervous system.

2. "Let me worry about it so you don't have to."

Children with anxiety often want to know that someone is worrying about things that are of vital importance to them. If your child is worried about something that is far outside of their control, like a natural disaster or large-scale problem, reassure them that you (or experts in the field) are already concerned and working toward a solution. The fact that someone that they trust is already working on it can go a long way toward alleviating their anxiety.

3. "What does science say about it?"

An anxious child who is armed with scientific research tends to be a much less anxious child. This especially works well for children who are concerned about safety and wellbeing. If a six year-old knows that most car accidents happen within ten km of the home, but wearing a seatbelt is the most effective way to prevent serious injury or death, wearing a seatbelt will alleviate a lot of his anxiety about riding in the car.

4. "Let's play catch."

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has been known for his psychological research into something he calls, "flow." The idea behind his theory is that the nervous system can only process so much information at a time and repetitive tasks such as playing catch or knitting actually trick the nervous system into focusing on the task rather than the stressor. This feeling that the world has melted away is what you are after, the activity you choose doesn't matter as much.

5. "Repeat this pattern after me."

Rhythm has a strong connection to relaxation. Therefore, the rhythmic beat of rain against a roof or ocean waves are included in meditative music. Clap a basic rhythm and have your child repeat it. Come up with longer and more complex rhythms until one of you messes up. Not only does this game bring out your child's competitive side, it focuses the nervous system on a task rather than a stressor.

6. "What is your favourite song?"

Find your child's favourite song then play it while singing and dancing. The joy associated with the song can replace the anxiety your child is feeling.

7. "Sometimes the only way to get to the other side of the river is to wade through it."

Older children especially need to be reassured that a) anxiety will end b) what is waiting for them on the other side is confidence.

8. "Just take one more step than before."

Anxious children sometimes need to be pushed to take one more progressive step, especially when they are trying something new. If your child is afraid of climbing the ladder to the slide, asking them to take one more step than before will eventually help them make it to the top.

9. "Tell me a scary, scary story."

Anxiety's high state of arousal is difficult to maintain over long periods of time. Having your anxious child describe the scariest story possible gets her to exhaust that fight or flight response on a creative pursuit.

10. "What would ___ do?"

Having your child imagine what their favourite superhero would do gives them a model for their behaviour. Inferring what their real-life hero would do and then modelling it is even better.

11. "I know how you feel."

We have all been anxious. Sometimes anxious kids just need to be heard and validated. While you may not be able to relate to the reason for their anxiety, you can certainly relate to how anxiety feels.

12. "How big is your worry? Let's see if we can make it smaller."

Quantifying anxiety in terms of size is far more effective for young children than a number scale. A worry the size of a mouse can be put in an imaginary cage. A worry the size of a tree can be "chopped down" using your child's imagination.

13. "Let's go help someone else."

Anxiety is isolating. In the midst of a panic, it is easy to feel like you are the only person in the world. Service is one of the best ways to help your child see that there are other needs in the world they have the power to meet.

14. "We need a dose of nature!"

Combine vitamin D with exercise and the wonders of an unexplored world and it is difficult for any child to stay anxious.

15. "Let's break it down."

Everything seems like a huge deal in the midst of anxiety. Breaking the task or experience into manageable parts can not only help your child see they have the ability to overcome their fear, but it more clearly defines what is causing their anxiety.

16. "Our family takes, 'No Thank You Bites.'"

For many children, the root of anxiety is the unknown. They would rather withdraw than take a risk. When you think about it in terms of food, requiring your child to take a "no thank you bite" before they announce they don't like a dish removes the commitment to something they hate. The same principle applies to trying anything new.

17. "Did I tell you about your grandmother?"

There is a strong correlation between a child's sense of emotional well-being and their knowledge of their family stories. When children see themselves as part of a larger story, they feel more secure and more confident.

18. "Are you uncomfortable in other ways right now?"

When we are sleepy, hungry, thirsty, or uncomfortable, anxiety tends to creep in. Sometimes, your child's anxiety can be curbed by simply addressing their physical needs.

19. "Tell me about your favourite ___."

This distraction technique gets your child talking about their favourite things. Who doesn't like talking about their favourite toy, movie, story, or friend?

20. "All I expect is that you do your best."

Reaffirming that it is your child's effort and not the outcome that matters most to you helps relieve the most anxious perfectionist.

21. "What is your interpretation?"

The cognitive therapy approach in psychology says that emotions and feelings are not based on events but how we interpret events. If we can remove the misinterpretation, we can start to alleviate the anxiety.

22. "Hard work trumps talent."

Perfectionists tend to view everyone else as "more than". She's more beautiful than me. He's more talented than I am. But hard work is not something that just happens. When your anxious child does not want to participate in an activity because everyone else is "more than", remind her that hard work (something she can control) wins in the end.

23. "I love you exactly as you are."

There is something about anxiety that makes us feel inherently unlovable. Sometimes all we need is to be reassured that we are loved, anxiety and all.

24. "You will not feel this way forever."

It is easy to think anxiety will last at its current level for the rest of our lives. In reality, anxiety tends to ebb and flow. Reassuring your child that their anxiety will fade helps remind them that they will feel normal again one day.

25. "Can you draw it?"

Drawing, painting or doodling about an anxiety provides kids with an outlet for their feelings when they can't use their words.



26. "Let's pretend we're blowing up a giant balloon. We'll take a deep breath and blow it up to the count of 5."

If you tell a child to take a deep breath in the middle of a panic attack, chances are you'll hear, "I CAN'T!" Instead, make it a game. Pretend to blow up a balloon, making funny noises in the process. Taking three deep breaths and blowing them out will actually reverse the stress response in the body and may even get you a few giggles in the process.

27. "I will say something, and I want you to say it exactly as I do: 'I can do this.'"

Do this 10 times at variable volume. Marathon runners use this trick all of the time to get past "the wall."

28. "Why do you think that is?"

This is especially helpful for older kids who can better articulate the "Why" in what they are feeling.

29. "What will happen next?"

If your child is anxious about an event, help them think through the event and identify what will come after it. Anxiety causes myopic vision, which makes life after the event seem to disappear.

30. "We are an unstoppable team."

Separation is a powerful anxiety trigger for young children. Reassure them that you will work together, even if they can't see you.

31. Have a battle cry: "I am a warrior!"; "I am unstoppable!"; or "Look out World, here I come!"

There is a reason why movies show people yelling before they go into battle. The physical act of yelling replaces the fear you are experiencing with endorphins. It can also be fun.

32. "If how you feel was a monster, what would it look like?"

Giving anxiety a characterization means you take a confusing feeling and make it concrete and palpable. Once kids have a worry character, they can talk to their worry.\

33. "I can't wait until ____."

Excitement about a future moment is contagious.

34. "This feeling will go away. Let's get comfortable until it does."

The act of getting comfortable calms the mind as well as the body. Weightier blankets have even been shown to reduce anxiety by increasing mild physical stimuli.

35. "Let's put your worry on the shelf while we ____ (listen to your favourite song, run around the block, read this story). Then we'll pick it back up again."

Those who are anxiety-prone often feel as though they have to carry their anxiety until whatever they are anxious about is over. This is especially difficult when your child is anxious about something they cannot change in the future. Setting it aside to do something fun can help put their worries into perspective.

36. "Let's learn more about it."

Let your child explore their fears by asking as many questions as they need to. After all, knowledge is power.



37. "Let's count _____."

This distraction technique requires no advance preparation. Counting the number of people wearing boots, the number of watches, the number of kids, or the number of hats in the room requires observation and thought, both of which detract from the anxiety your child is feeling.

38. "I need you to tell me when 2 minutes have gone by."

Time is a powerful tool when children are anxious. By watching a clock or a watch for movement, a child has a focus point other than what is happening.

39. "Close your eyes. Picture this..."

Visualization is a powerful technique used to ease pain and anxiety. Guide your child through imagining a safe, warm, happy place where they feel comfortable. If they are listening intently, the physical symptoms of anxiety will dissipate.

40. "I get scared/nervous/anxious sometimes too. It's no fun."

Empathy wins in many, many situations. It may even strike up a conversation with your older child about how you overcame anxiety.

41. "Let's pull out our calm-down checklist."

Anxiety can hijack the logical brain; carry a checklist with coping skills your child has practiced. When the need presents itself, operate off of this checklist.

42. "You are not alone in how you feel."

Pointing out all of the people who may share their fears and anxieties helps your child understand that overcoming anxiety is universal.

43. "Tell me the worst thing that could possibly happen."

Once you've imagined the worst possible outcome of the worry, talk about the likelihood of that worst possible situation happening. Next, ask your child about the best possible outcome. Finally, ask them about the most likely outcome. The goal of this exercise is to help a child think more accurately during their anxious experience.

44. "Worrying is helpful, sometimes."

This seems completely counter-intuitive to tell a child that is already anxious but pointing out why anxiety is helpful reassures your child that there isn't something wrong with them.

45. "What does your thought bubble say?"

If your child reads comics, they are familiar with thought bubbles and how they move the story along. By talking about their thoughts as third-party observers, they can gain perspective on them.

46. "Let's find some evidence."

Collecting evidence to support or refute your child's reasons for anxiety helps your child see if their worries are based on fact.



47. "Let's have a debate."

Older children especially love this exercise because they have permission to debate their parent. Have a point, counter-point style debate about the reasons for their anxiety. You may learn a lot about their reasoning in the process.

48. "What is the first piece we need to worry about?"

Anxiety often makes mountains out of molehills. One of the most important strategies for overcoming anxiety is to break the mountain back down into manageable chunks. In doing this, we realize the entire experience isn't causing anxiety, just one or two parts.

49. "Let's list all of the people you love."

Anais Nin is credited with the quote, "Anxiety is love's greatest killer." If that statement is true, then love is anxiety's greatest killer as well. By recalling all of the people that your child loves and why, love will replace anxiety.

50. "Remember when..."

Competence breeds confidence. Confidence quells anxiety. Helping your child recall a time when they overcame anxiety gives them feelings of competence and thereby confidence in their abilities.

51. "I am proud of you already."

Knowing you are pleased with their efforts, regardless of the outcome, alleviates the need to do something perfectly – a source of stress in a lot of kids.

52. "We're going for a walk."

Exercise relieves anxiety for up to several hours as it burns excess energy, loosens tense muscles and boosts mood. If your child can't take a walk right now, have them run in place, bounce on a yoga ball, jump rope or stretch.

53. "Let's watch your thought pass by."

Ask your children to pretend the anxious thought is a train that's stopped at the station above their head. Soon, like all trains, the thought will move on to its next destination.

54. "I'm taking a deep breath."

Model a calming strategy and encourage your child to mirror you. If your child allows you, hold them to your chest so they can feel your rhythmic breathing and regulate theirs.

55. "How can I help?"

Let your child guide the situation and tell you what calming strategy or tool they prefer in this situation.

56. "This feeling will pass."

Often, a child will feel like their anxiety is never-ending. Instead of shutting down, avoiding, or squashing the worry, remind them that relief is on the way.



57. "Let's squeeze this stress ball together."

When your child directs their anxiety to a stress ball, they feel emotional relief. Buy a ball, keep a handful of play dough nearby or make your own homemade stress ball by filling a balloon with flour or rice.

58. "I see Widdle is worried again. Let's teach Widdle not to worry."

Create a character to represent the worry, such as Widdle the Worrier. Tell your child that Widdle is worried and you need to teach him some coping skills.

59. "I know this is hard."

Acknowledge that the situation is difficult. Your validation shows your child that you respect them.

60. "I have your smell buddy right here."

A smell buddy, fragrance necklace or diffuser can calm anxiety, especially when you fill it with lavender, sage, chamomile, sandalwood, or jasmine.

61. "Tell me about it."

Without interrupting, listen to your child talk about what's bothering them. Talking it out can give your child time to process their thoughts and come up with a solution that works for them.

62. "You are so brave!"

Affirm your child's ability to handle the situation, and you empower them to succeed.

63. "Which calming strategy do you want to use right now?"

Because each anxious situation is different, give your child the opportunity to choose the calming strategy he wants to use.

64. "We'll get through this together."

Supporting your child with your presence and commitment can empower them to persevere until the scary situation is over.

65. "What else do you know about (scary thing)?"

When your child faces a consistent anxiety, research it when they are calm. Read books about the scary thing and learn as much as possible about it. When the anxiety surfaces again, ask your child to recall what they've learned. This step removes power from the scary thing and empowers your child.

66. "Let's go to your happy place."

Visualization is an effective tool against anxiety. When your child is calm, practice this calming strategy until they are able to use it successfully during anxious moments.

67. "What do you need from me?"

Ask your child to tell you what they need. It could be a hug, space or a solution.



68. "If you gave your feeling a colour, what would it be?"

Asking another person to identify what they're feeling in the midst of anxiety is nearly impossible. But asking your children to give how they feel with a colour, gives them a chance to think about how they feel relative to something simple. Follow up by asking why their feeling is that colour.

69. "Let me hold you."

Give your child a front hug, a hug from behind, or let them sit on your lap. The physical contact provides a chance for your child to relax and feel safe.

70. "Remember when you made it through XYZ?"

Reminding your child of a past success will encourage them to persevere in this situation.

71. "Help me move this wall."

Hard work, like pushing on a wall, relieves tension and emotions. Resistance bands or cords also work.

72. "Let's write a new story."

Your child has written a story in their mind about how the future is going to turn out. This future makes them feel anxious. Accept their story and then ask them to come up with a few more plotlines where the story's ending is different. Regardless of the source, anxiety happens to us all. Knowing how to combat stress in their lives is a skill that will serve your children for years to come.

