



Helpful Tips for Parents: Healthy Thinking for Children

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Anxious children tend to think differently than other children. For example, they can easily come up with 101 ways that things will go wrong. They also tend to see the world as more threatening and dangerous. Remember, some anxious/negative thoughts and feelings are perfectly normal. This process will help your child understand that feeling anxious or negative is only one way to handle situations but they have many other alternatives.

What your child says to himself is called “self – talk”. Anxious children tend to have negative or anxious self- talk.

- “I know I will fail the test”
- “What if I can’t do it?”
- “No one likes me”
- “I am stupid”
- “It’s way too hard for me”

It is important for children to identify their self-talk because *anxious thoughts lead to anxious feelings, which leads to anxious behavior*. For example.....

Anxious thoughts about the first day of school:

Thought	Feeling	Behavior
“Something bad will happen to mom when I am at school”	Scared, anxious, worried	Avoid school, cry, etc.

Or, helpful thoughts about the first day of school:

Thought	Feeling	Behavior
“The first day will be a good day....I will get to see my friends again”	Excited, happy, energized	Go to school willingly, say “hi” to friends,

The first step is to help your child to start paying attention to their self-talk, especially anxious thoughts.

Step 1: Teach your child about self-talk

- Thoughts are the words we say to ourselves without speaking out loud
- We have many thoughts each hour of the day
- Everyone – even grown ups – have some thoughts that make them feel good and some thoughts that make them feel not so good.
- Thoughts just happen – we don’t always stop to notice them

Tell your child you are going to help them learn to slow their thoughts down and pay more attention to them. Some families find it helpful to post a picture of a stop sign in a central

location in their house. This serves as a visual reminder for your child to stop and pay attention to their thoughts.

Remember, this concept can be difficult for some children to understand. It can become even more difficult for them to decipher the difference between a thought and a feeling. For example, your child might say, "I am scared" – *which is a feeling* versus "that noise sounds like a burglar trying to break in!" – *which is a thought*. It is important to help your child identify both their thoughts and feelings. A helpful way to describe this difference is to tell your child that thoughts come from their head and feelings come from their heart.

Step 2: Help your child identify thoughts that leads to feelings of anxiety or negativity

- Ask questions like "what is making you feel scared", "what would happen if you tried even though its hard?", "what are you worried will happen?"
- Help them learn to label their anxious, worried, or negative thoughts

Step 3: Teach that what we think affects how we feel

- When we expect bad things to happen, we feel anxious
- When we expect things to be too hard or go wrong, we feel negative
- What we think can control how we feel

Use examples that are easily understood by your child. A very basic example might be... If you see a dog and you think he is cute, you will feel calm. However, if you are afraid the dog will bite you, you will feel scared. Try saying, "We have hundreds of thoughts every day. Some are helpful but some are unhelpful. A helpful thought makes you feel happy and confident. An unhelpful thought will probably make you feel worried, nervous, sad, or mad. Let's think of some examples of your helpful thoughts and unhelpful thoughts".

- Once your child can identify the difference between helpful and unhelpful thoughts, ask them to imagine being in a particular scenario such as finding a seat in the lunchroom or getting a low grade on a test. Help them identify the unhelpful thoughts they might have. Then, help them come up with new helpful thoughts they could use.
- Then, incorporate these discussions into their every day life. When you hear your child expressing an unhelpful thought say, "let's stop and pay attention to what you are thinking". It is also important to help your child identify unhelpful behaviors (hitting, screaming, etc.) and helpful behaviors (asking for help, taking a break, etc.). You can offer your child alternative ways to think and act.

Adapted from:

- <http://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children>, <http://www.childanxiety.net/>, http://childparenting.about.com/od/healthsafety/a/how_to_handle_anxiety_in_children.htm
- [Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries, and Phobias](#) by Tamar Ellsas