



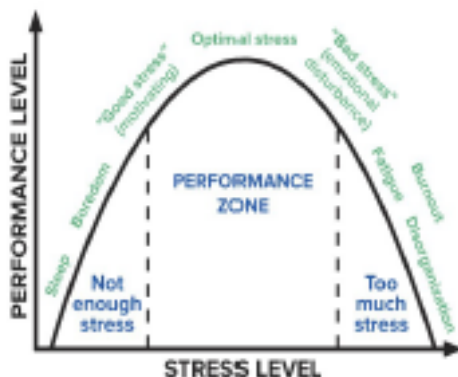
Talking About Anxiety Stress-Free... for parents!

Stress and anxiety are challenges for many children and teenagers—but also for you as a parent! This document is a reference tool to help you develop your knowledge about anxiety and learn practical strategies to help your children deal with anxiety.

Stress or anxiety?

Stress is a universal and necessary response in human beings. It's an alarm signal that motivates the individual to take action in order to adapt and survive. Faced with a stressful situation, your child either confronts it by taking action or flees it. Procrastination is a way to escape.

(Lupien, 2019; Marchand, Letarte and Seidah, 2018; Shih and Lin, 2017; Strack et al., 2017)



Did you know?

The inverted stress curve shows how stress is necessary when well balanced.

However, too little stress or too much stress has a negative impact on functioning.

(Palazzolo and Arnaud, 2013; Yerkes and Dodson, 1908)

Anxiety occurs in anticipation of a situation. The situation doesn't need to be real to trigger an anxiety response. It's also the tendency to create disaster scenarios and to imagine fears based on things that haven't yet occurred. It becomes problematic if it prevents your child from functioning properly and causes distress.

This tool was developed by

Anxiety is the fear of being afraid!

(Lupien, 2019; Yerkes and Dodson, 1908)

Signs

To help children deal with their anxiety, you first have to identify the sources! Here are some signs that indicate that your child may be anxious. It's important to note that these signs may vary from child to child.

- Difficulty sleeping;
- Loss of appetite;
- Intense fears leading to avoidance;
- Excessive control of their environment;
- Fear of new situations;
- Refusing to attend school or participate in activities;
- Difficulty making friends;
- Stomach aches and headaches, vomiting, fatigue, muscle tension;
- Concentration and organizational problems;
- Excessive need for reassurance;
- Irritability, tantrums, bouts of tears, opposition;
- Low self-esteem, distress.

(Government of Québec, 2018; Dumas, 2013; CYMHIN-MAD, 2010; Hincks-Dellcrest-ABCs, n.d., in Government of Ontario, 2013)

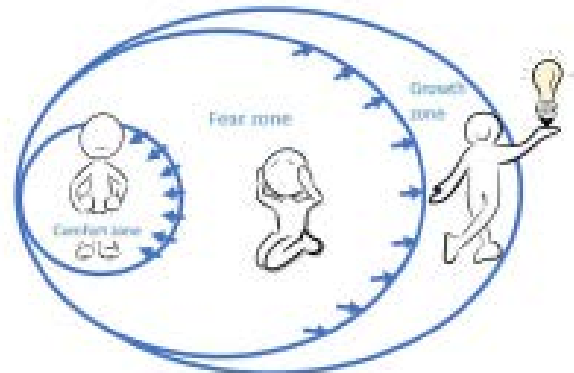


Anxiety may sometimes take the form of **oppositional behaviour, tantrums or embarrassment**. This may be perceived as laziness, a lack of motivation or respect. Remember that these are **defence mechanisms** that support the child's belief that they won't succeed or aren't up to the task.

(Dumont, Leclerc & Massé, 2015)

COMFORT ZONE: an important concept

A **comfort zone** is a situation where children feel good or in familiar territory. To successfully expand this comfort zone, children must go through their **fear zone**. To avoid being afraid, children may tend to return to their comfort zone. This is called **avoidance**. The more children avoid fear, the more their comfort zone shrinks and the more their fear zone increases. On the contrary, the more children face their fears, the more their comfort zone expands and their fear zone shrinks. This can lead to a world of growth!



(Based on White, 2009)

Avoidance is anxiety's best friend!

Although avoidance seems to calm anxiety at first, it ends up making it worse. It's therefore important to help students deal with anxiety-provoking situations. This is called **exposure**. Anxiety is uncomfortable, but it's not dangerous!

Attitudes to encourage

1. Help children manage what is making them anxious

- o Encourage children to gradually perform tasks they fear in small steps;
- o Don't avoid situations that scare them. Teach children to face them calmly while supporting them;
- o Encourage children when they're courageous, celebrating the times when they have faced their fears.

(Couture, 2016)

Accommodation consists in altering your parenting style to prevent or lessen the discomfort your child feels because of their anxiety. While accommodation may lessen the child's anxiety in the very short term by allowing them to avoid the anxiety-provoking situation, it actually maintains and even increases it in the long term.

(Thompson-Hollands et al., 2014)

2. Act as a role model

Stress resonance

Like sound, stress resonates with the people around a stressed or anxious person. These people then feel the stress and their bodies will also produce stress hormones. The closer the people are, the stronger the response.

(Lupien, 2019)

- o Address the anxiety-provoking situations you are going through and share your strategies;
- o Accept that you will make mistakes;
- o Talk about your emotions;
- o Use effective strategies to manage your own emotions and stress (your stress may exacerbate your children's stress). This is called stress resonance;
- o Take care of yourself and, if necessary, seek help;
- o Adopt healthy lifestyles.

(Psychology Foundation of Canada, 2011)

3. Offer a safe, positive and welcoming environment

- o Establish clear rules and consistently and coherently apply disciplinary measures;
- o Adopt a positive attitude toward the child; encourage them, celebrate their wins and efforts, take an interest in the things they like;
- o Help your child prepare for new situations;
- o Remind them that you trust them;
- o Avoid trying to control everything. New and unexpected things are part of life, and they allow the child to develop their tolerance to stress.

4. Encourage them to be autonomous and independent

- o Give your child the chance to try things, take risks... and make mistakes;
- o Be involved in your child's life... but not too much!

5. Limit the sources of pressure

- o Resist social pressure to be faster, more, better;
- o Set realistic expectations based on learning rather than performance;
- o Avoid overloading your child's schedule;
- o Don't confuse your ambitions with your child's.

(Berthiaume, 2017; Couture, 2016; Duclos, 2011)

6. Be a good listener

- o Don't trivialize or minimize what your child is going through; fear is real, even if you don't understand it;
- o Normalize what your child is experiencing;
- o Help them put their emotions into words;
- o Ask questions and listen;
- o Don't try to find a solution to the fears at all costs; children often simply need to be heard and understood;
- o Set up a time with children when they can talk to you about their concerns instead of constantly responding to their demands for reassurance. This will help them develop their tolerance for uncertainty.

(Couture, 2016; Naître et grandir, 2016)

7. Help your child develop healthy lifestyle habits

- o Get enough sleep;
- o Eat healthy, be active, exercise;
- o Maintain healthy relationships with others;
- o Make time for fun;
- o Maintain a good balance between the different spheres of your life;
- o Be kind and compassionate;
- o Practise mindfulness;
- o Cultivate self-esteem;
- o Limit screen time;
- o Have a spiritual life.

(Naître et grandir, 2016)

8. Try out stress management strategies with your child

- o Physical exercise;
- o Yoga;
- o Breathing and relaxation;
- o Mindfulness;
- o Arts;
- o Laughing;
- o Contact with nature.

For more information:

<https://sante-mentale-jeunesse.usherbrooke.ca/je-suis-un-jeune/boite-a-outils-2/strategies-pour-appivoiser-mon-stress/>

(Every Moment Counts, 2014; Psychology Foundation of Canada, 2011; Gasparovich, 2008; Leroux, 2016)

Resources for further information

- LigneParents (toll-free help line: 1 800 361-5085)
- Tel-Jeunes (toll-free help line: 1 800 263-2266)
- Mouvement Santé Mentale Québec: <https://www.mouvementsmq.ca/>
- Canadian Psychological Association: <http://cpa.ca>

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