

# How to Empower Your Child to Deal With School Anxiety

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October 28, 2015



School anxiety is awful for children and heartwrenching for parents. It's so common, but it doesn't always look the same. Sometimes it will dress itself up as illness (headaches, tummy aches), sometimes as a tantrum or fierce defiance, and sometimes it looks exactly as you would expect.

## **School Anxiety. What it's not.**

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If I could write this across the sky, I would:

Separation anxiety and school anxiety have absolutely nothing to do with behaviour, defiance or poor parenting. Nothing at all.

Anyone who is tempted to tutt, judge, or suggest a toughening up of parents or children, don't. Hush and hold it in. The assumptions on which you've built your high ground are leading you astray. It's likely, anyway, that parents dealing with school anxiety have already tried the tough love thing, even if only out of desperation. It's understandable that they would. They'd try anything – parents are pretty amazing like that.

They are great parents, with great kids. If only being tougher was all it took they all would have done it yesterday and we'd be talking about something easier, like how to catch a unicorn – or something.

## **Why getting tough won't work.**

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School anxiety isn't a case of 'won't', it's a case of 'can't'. It's anxiety. It's a physiological response from a brain that thinks there's danger. Sometimes the anxiety is driven by the fear that something will happen to the absent parent. Sometimes it's not driven by anything in particular. Whether the danger is real or not is irrelevant. Many kids with anxiety would know somewhere inside them that there is nothing to worry about, but they're being driven by a brain that thinks there's a threat and acts as though it's true.

When this happens, the fight or flight response is triggered and the body is automatically surged with neurochemicals to deal with the threat. That's why anxiety can look like a tantrum (fight) or resistance (flight). It's the physiological, neurochemical response of a brain on high alert. It's hard enough to control your own brain when it's on high alert, let alone someone else's, however much that someone else wants to do the 'right' thing.

We humans are wired towards keeping ourselves safe above everything else. It's instinctive, automatic, and powerful. This is why tough love, punishment or negotiation just won't work. If you were in quicksand, no amount of any of that would keep you there while you got sucked under. You'd fight for your life at any cost. School is less dramatic than quicksand but to a brain and a body in fight or flight, it feels the same.

When you're dealing with an anxious child, you're dealing with a brain that will fight with warrior daring to keep him or her safe. It's not going to back down because of some tough words or tough consequences.

The good news is that there are powerful ways to turn this around. Let's talk about those.

## **But first ...**

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Before we go further, it's important to make sure that the anxiety isn't from bullying, friendship problems or problems with schoolwork that might need their own response. Teachers generally know what's going on so it's always worth having a chat to get a clearer idea of what you're dealing with. In many cases, there are no other issues at all. On paper, everything looks absolutely fine. That's anxiety for you.

## **Empower them.**

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Anxiety has a way of making people feel like they have no control. It's inexplicable and feels as though it comes from nowhere. Explaining to your kids how anxiety works will demystify what they're going through and take away some of the punch. It's powerful. Here are some ideas for how to explain it in a way they can understand:

Why does anxiety happen? The words.

Anxiety has a really good reason for being there. Your brain is great at protecting you. It's been practicing for millions of years and is brilliant at it. If it thinks there's something to worry about, it will instantly surge your body with fuel – oxygen, adrenaline, hormones – to make you strong, fast and powerful, kind of like a superhero. This is the fight or flight response and it comes from a part at the back of your brain called the amygdala. This part of your brain is small and shaped like an almond. It's like a fierce (but very kind) warrior and it's there to protect you.

Sometimes your brain gets a little overprotective. That's kind of understandable. You're pretty brilliant at a lot of things and the world needs you. Your brain is in charge of keeping you safe and it takes its job very seriously. It's a relief to know the 'keep me safe' switch in your brain is working. (Phew!)

When it thinks there's a threat, it doesn't stop to think about whether or not the threat is real – it's all action and not a lot of thought. In fact, the part of your brain that is able to think clearly, calm things down and make great decisions about what to do next, is sent 'offline' if the brain senses a threat. That can actually be really handy and is another clever way to keep you safe. If there's a real danger, like an out of control bus screaming towards you, you don't want your brain to keep you in the path while it figures out whether or not to get out of there.

When it comes to school, your brain can sometimes read it as a threat, even though it isn't. That's because school is a bit different to home – there are new people, different things and routines, you're away from your parents, sometimes it's noisy, and sometimes you don't really know what to expect. To a brain whose job it is to protect you, that can feel like a really big deal.

This is why the bad feelings you feel when you think about going to school can be so powerful. It's your brain telling your body to stay away from school because there could be something dangerous there. It might also be telling you that something could happen to the people you love if you aren't near them. Brains can be very convincing, but they're not always accurate.

Even if you know there's nothing to worry about, your brain won't always listen to that, and it will get your body ready to run for your life or fight for it. We're going to talk about how to deal with this, but first let's talk about what's happening up in that powerpack in your head.

Your brain and anxiety – what you need to know.

When your brain feels really strongly that it has to protect you (and remember, your brain doesn't care if the danger is real or not) the fight or flight part of your brain forces the thinking part of your brain to be quiet so that it can get on and deal with the danger. If your brain had a conversation, it would probably sound something like this:

**The Thinking Part:** Oh, we have school today. Cool. Let's do it.

**The 'Fight or Flight' Part (the Amygdala):** Yeah, no. That's not going to happen. You're going to be away from home and you don't really know what's happening today. It could be dangerous, so 'Thinking Part', you need to sit out while I check it out.

**Thinking Part:** Dude. It's school. There's not going to be anything dangerous. Maybe new or unfamiliar, but not dangerous. You need to calm down, okay? Chill.

**Amygdala:** Whoa! You seriously don't get it. If there's something bad – and I'm pretty sure there's a chance of that – then we're going to have to run for it or fight – but fighting can bring its own bag of trouble – so maybe run. Or maybe just stay away. Yep. Let's stay away. I'm trying to save a life here and you're kinda getting in my way.

**Thinking Part:** For a brain, you're not being very sensible. Think about it. It's school. It's teachers and other kid-sized humans and playgrounds and lunch and things. Nothing at all to worry about.

**Amygdala:** Gosh, you seriously don't get it. This could be deadly. You're getting my way man. I'm sending you offline for a bit while I check it out. Here have this – some oxygen, some adrenalin, some hormones. It's superhero fuel, but for you it will keep you quiet. Now, go to sleep. I've got this. I'm saving your life. You're welcome.

By now, the amygdala has surged your body with fuel to make you strong, fast and powerful in case you have to fight or flee. Of course, when it comes to school there's nothing to fight or flee but the thinking, good decision-making part of your brain is offline remember.

Why does anxiety feel the way it does?

When there's no need to fight or flee, there's nothing to burn off the superhero fuel that's racing through you, so it builds up. That fuel is perfectly safe, and in the right circumstances can be really helpful, but it can feel bad when it builds up. The feelings and emotions you have when you're anxious, or when it's time to say goodbye are all because of this buildup.

Here are some of the things you'll probably feel and why you'll feel them.

You might feel puffed or breathless. You might also feel the blood rush to your face and it might feel warm.

*That's because your brain has told your body to stop using up oxygen on strong deep breaths, and to send it to your muscles so they can use it for energy to fight or run. To make this happen, your brain organises for your breathing to change from normal, strong breaths to fast little breaths. When you think about it, it's a pretty good way to save oxygen, even though it might not feel that great.*

Your heart might feel like it's beating out of your chest. It might feel like you're having a heart attack.

*This is because your heart is working hard to pump the fuel around your body so it can fight or flee. It's doing a great job, but it can feel a bit scary. It's nothing to worry about. It's just your heart doing exactly what a healthy heart does. You are definitely not having a heart attack. If you were, there would be other symptoms, including a pain in your chest that would be unbearable, not just uncomfortable.*

You might feel dizzy or a bit confused.

*This happens because there's nothing to fight or flee, so there's nothing to burn the fuel that's surging through your body. As the oxygen builds up, the carbon dioxide drops, making you feel dizzy and confused.*

Your arms and legs might feel tense or wobbly.

*Your brain is sending fuel to your arms (so they can fight) and to your legs (so they can run away).*

You might feel a bit sweaty.

*Your body does this to cool itself down. It doesn't want to overheat if it has to fight or flee.*

You might feel like bursting into tears or you might feel really angry

*This is the handy work of the amygdala – the part of the brain that triggers the fight or flight. It's also involved in emotions. It's in full control and it's working super hard. When it's highly active, you might get emotional or angry at all sorts of things or nothing at all. It's a really normal part of anxiety.*

You might feel like you're going to vomit or you might actually vomit. You might get tummy aches or feel as though you have butterflies in your belly. Your mouth might also feel a little bit dry.

*Everything that's happening in your body that isn't necessary in that moment for survival will shut down. One of these is your digestive system, which is the part of the body that gets the nutrients from food. That can wait, so it shuts down until the crisis (or what your brain thinks is a crisis – nobody said brains were always sensible!) is over. It's a great way to save energy, but it can make you feel sick. It's feels awful, but it definitely won't hurt you and it's definitely not a sign of anything worse going on inside you.*

As you can see, there's a really good reason for every physical symptom. It's your brain doing a great job of what brains are meant to do – keep you alive.

This is why you might feel so strongly you that you can't go to school – because that's what your brain is telling you. It's why it might upset you when people tell you there's nothing to worry about. You kind of already know this, but your brain and your body aren't so convinced – your body is being driven by a brain that thinks it's under threat. This can feel scary, which is totally understandable.

Here's the thing though: Even though your brain is telling you there's danger, sometimes it might misread the situation. It happens to everyone from time to time but some brains will be a lot quicker to sense threat than others. There's nothing wrong with that. An anxious brain is just as healthy and strong and capable as a non-anxious brain. In fact, it's often even more capable, more creative and more sensitive to what's happening around it.

When your brain is reacting to things that aren't really a threat, what it actually needs is for you to come in and be the boss. Let's talk about how to do that.

1. Your anxiety isn't the enemy, so try not to fight it.

Remember that the amygdala that sets your anxiety in motion is like a fierce warrior that's trying to protect you. Even though it might be causing you trouble, it really doesn't mean to. If it could, it would hug you and walk one step in front of you to keep you safe. It can't do that, so instead it surges you with fuel to keep you strong, fast and powerful whenever it thinks you need it, and sometimes just in case. If you can put the thinking part of your brain (the pre-frontal cortex) back in control, it will stop the fuel surging through you and this will help you to feel better and braver. It really needs your help though because the only way it's going to be let back in control is if the amygdala thinks you're safe. That message needs to come from you.

2. Let your brain know, 'I've got this. You can stop worrying now.'

Luckily, there is a very cool thing your brain can do and it's called the relaxation response. You don't have to believe it works because it's programmed into your brain, like breathing, so it just does. But – it won't work until you flick the switch. The best way to do that is to breathe. Not just any breathing though – strong, deep breaths that come from your belly.

- in through your nose for three,

- pause,

- out through your mouth for three.

(Imagine that you have a hot cocoa in your hands and you're breathing in the delicious smell through your nose for three seconds, then blowing it cool for three seconds.)

When you do this, it's like a gorgeous massage for your amygdala. It totally relaxes it. It tells it that you're okay and that it can chill for a bit. When your amygdala is relaxed, something kind of wonderful happens. Your prefrontal cortex (the 'let's think about this' part of your brain) can take back control. The first thing that it does is to neutralise (get rid of) the fuel

(oxygen, hormones, adrenalin). When that happens, the intense physical and emotional things you're feeling all start to settle down. You're back in control. Back to being the boss of your brain. It might not feel completely comfortable straight away, but it will be to a level that you can handle. Very soon after that, you'll feel as strong, brave and as awesome as ever.

3. Get really active for a couple of minutes or go for a walk.

Remember that the fuel surging through you is there to make you strong, fast and powerful. If you don't burn it up, it will build up, and that's when it feels bad. Walking or exercise will burn the fuel and stop the awful physical things you're feeling. If you can get sweaty for five minutes by running, skipping, jumping – anything – that will really help. Otherwise going for a brisk walk will also be a great thing to do.

4. Feel what's happening outside of yourself.

When you feel anxious, you become really aware of what's happening inside your body. Your brain also continues to worry itself silly by living in the future with a truck load of 'what if's'. Bring your brain back to the present by turning your attention to what's happening around you. Feel the ground beneath your feet. Touch your arms and feel the touch of your fingers against your skin. Feel your breath coming into you, and then going out. Feel the temperature. Hear the noises around you. You've got the idea.

5. Dear Me, This is what you need to know ...

When you're calm, and the thinking part of your brain is back in control, make a list of things you would like your amygdala to know. Then, use this as a reminder when you're feeling anxious about school. What would you say to someone if you saw them feeling the way you feel when it's time to go to school or say goodbye? These are the things that the thinking part of your brain would say to your amygdala if it was online when you were feeling anxious. Write it down and use it to remind your brain of what it needs to know when it starts to get you into fight or flight mode. Remember, you're the boss. Maybe it will look something like this:

Dear Me,

This is what you need to know ... you are completely okay. You're feeling like this because your brain thinks there's something to be scared of. It's trying to look after you, but it needs you need to be the boss.

You're brave. You're strong. And you're okay. Here's why:

- ♥ Your friend(s) are at school and they care about you.
- ♥ Your teacher is on your side and would never ever let anything happen to you.
- ♥ School is strengthening your brain, so it can be even more amazing.

- ♥ Today you're doing these fun things at school ... (even if it's just playing at lunch or eating something delicious – it all counts!).
- ♥ You're brave and you can handle school no matter what.
- ♥ In fact, you're probably one of the bravest ones there today because you feel really anxious – and you're doing it anyway.
- ♥ You only have to get through the next five minutes.

Go me. You're pretty awesome.

Love, Me.

#### 6. Get organised.

Make a list of the things you need to do before you leave home to make your day goes smoothly. That way, you can remind yourself that things are under control, even if they feel like they aren't.

Breakfast eaten. (Gotta be strong).

Teeth brushed.

Uniform on.

Homework done.

Lunch packed.

Shoes on.

Bag packed.

Parents (or important adult) hugged.

'See ya later,' to pets – done.

'See ya later,' to sibling/s – done.

Hair – done. Lookin' fine.

Good to go.

#### 7. Get some sleep.

When you sleep, your brain gets stronger and sorts out it's emotional worries. The more sleep you get, the better.

#### 8. Have something lavender nearby.

Lavender oil calms a stressed out, hectic brain. Spray it around your room or have some ready when you need it by putting lavender oil on a tissue. Have a little smell when you need to feel calmer.

9. Anxiety and courage always exist together.

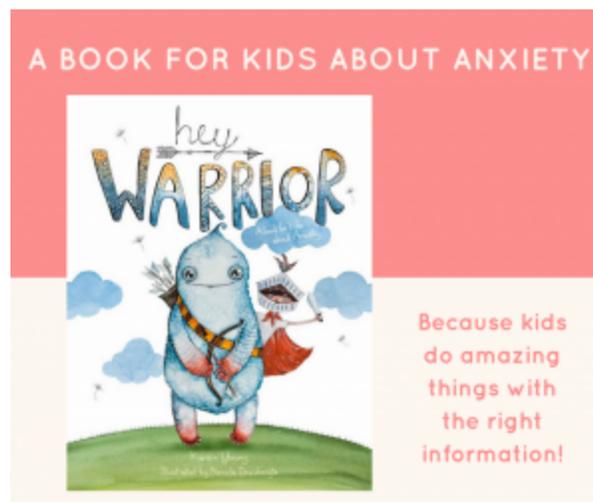
Anxiety means that you're doing something brave. It doesn't matter whether it's easy for other people or not. We all find different things hard or easy. If you're anxious, it's because your brain thinks there's something to worry about. It responds the same whether you're about to give a presentation or about to skydive. It doesn't matter what the thing is that's making you nervous, an anxious brain is a brave brain, an anxious body is a brave body, and an anxious person is always a brave person.

### **And finally ...**

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School anxiety never just swipes at one person. It's affects kids, parents, siblings and the teachers who also invest in the children in their care. One of the worst things about anxiety is the way it tends to show up without notice or a good reason. For kids (or anyone) who struggle with anxiety, it can feel like a barrelling – it comes from nowhere, makes no sense and has a mind of its own. The truth is, the mind that anxiety has is theirs, and when they can understand their own power, they can start to establish themselves firmly as the 'boss of their brain'. Understanding this will empower them, and will help them to draw on the strength, wisdom and courage that has been in them all along.

### **You might also like ...**



*'Hey Warrior' is the book I've written for children to help them understand anxiety and to find their 'brave'. It explains why anxiety feels the way it does, and it will teach them how they can 'be the boss of their brains' during anxiety, to feel calm. It's not always enough to tell kids what to do – they need to understand why it works. Hey Warrior does this, giving explanations in a fun, simple, way that helps things make sense in a, 'Oh so that's how that works!' kind of way, alongside gorgeous illustrations.*

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