

**How Parents Can Build Emotional Resilience
in Young Children (3-8 years) Who are Anxious**

The Do's and Don'ts
Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.

Prior to the Covid pandemic, about one in five children have struggled with feelings of fear, hopelessness, and sadness at some time during their development. When children feel anxious, their brains are flooded with feelings of danger or future threat. These powerful feelings and anxious thoughts can lead to emotional dysregulation with physical and behavioral outcomes such as:

- Rapid heartbeat
- Dizzy or shakiness
- Rapid breathing or shortness of breath
- Stomach aches, nausea, vomiting
- Anger, defiance
- Irritability
- Tantrum outbursts
- Crying

Sometimes these symptoms that involve children's thoughts and feelings are called *internalizing disorders*. For many children these fears or worries won't last. However, when the symptoms are intense or persist longer than 1-2 months, they can interfere with the child's ability to attend school, to be away from parents, to focus and concentrate, to get adequate sleep, or to make friends and engage in social activities.

Although our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on children is still evolving, it seems that despite the uncertainty and challenges of Covid, 60-70% of children have been remarkably resilient, emotionally regulated, and able to cope with the uncertainty and ongoing stress. On the other hand, since the pandemic, there has been an upsurge in reported rates of child anxiety and internalizing symptoms. Current estimates show as many as 30-40% of children and adolescents are experiencing anxiety, depression, or stress. Certain groups are more at risk for anxiety disorders and are more vulnerable to the added impact of the pandemic: those living in poverty, those with unstable housing, and those with a prior history of developmental delays or mental health issues regardless of their socioeconomic background. How can we help these at-risk children and promote their "protective factors", their strengths and resilience?

If you have a child who is experiencing anxiety, depression, or stress, the first step is to talk to your health care provider and have a careful evaluation to get the best diagnoses and treatment plan. It is essential that parents are involved in treatment so that they learn ways to help their children cope and manage their fears. It is an unfortunate fact that many families are having difficulty getting referrals for mental health assessments at present. Providers are overwhelmed by the number of families that are seeking help, and there are often long wait times for an appointment.

While the following recommendations are not a substitute for professional help, here are a few tips for ways parents can build their child's resilience and help them manage the uncertainties in Covid times and stressful life events in general.

Do accept and validate your child's fears and worries and help them learn how to manage them. When your child expresses uncomfortable feelings, such as fear and worry, name these feelings and what the experience is that may be causing them. *"You are sad and scared because your granny is sick. Is that right?"* This validation shows acceptance. It is nonjudgmental and helps your child feel understood. Combine your validation of their feeling with gentle suggestions for a coping statement that helps them face their fears. This approach assures your support and understanding of the child's fears and shows your belief that your child can manage the situation and the feelings. For example, saying, *"Maybe we can draw a picture for her that will help her know we love her. This will make her happy."* Or, *"I see you are afraid to ask your friend to play (validate), let's practice what you can say (coping)?"*

Do use positive forecasting Predict for your child that things will be eventually get better. *"I can see you are afraid to go back to school, but your friends will be so happy to see you. What might you tell them when you see them?"* Or, *"You look worried and lonely, but soon you will be playing soccer and will have fun."* It is important to note that positive forecasting is showing your child a possible positive outcome, but still allows your child to have their unhappy feelings in the moment.

Don't avoid all situations that worry or upset your child. It is normal and natural to want your child to be happy and to want to protect or shield them from unhappy and stressful feelings. For example, it can feel easier to let them stay home from school, to avoid play dates, or not go to the dentist if these events are hard for you child. However, while avoiding a stressful situation will reduce your child's anxiety in the moment, it will lead to more anxiety and avoidance in the long run. They will not learn to cope with the situations and will be more anxious and eager to avoid when the situation occurs again. The best way to support your child is to acknowledge their feeling of anxiety and to express your confidence that they can manage the situation well. You might say, *"I can see you are afraid to have that vaccination shot, but I'm here if you need a hug or chat. I know you can do this."* When you take this approach of scaffolding the behavior you want to encourage and helping your child face their fears, you will find their anxiety will decrease with time, and they will become more resilient and confident about their ability to manage their challenges.

Don't avoid talking about stressful events that cause your child to be afraid, cry, or be upset. In the long run this avoidance can reinforce the child's fear. The more you support your child to avoid doing certain things, the more you are teaching your child there is something to be afraid of. Instead encourage them to persist when things are difficult. For example, saying to your child, *"I know this is really frustrating and difficult now, but you have strong and brave muscles and I know you can be brave."*

Do limit exposure to sensational media coverage. While it is important to help your child face and cope with day-to-day events in their real lives, it is not helpful for young children to be exposed to constant media coverage about catastrophic events. For anxious elementary

school age children, it may be useful to limit almost all exposure to media. For older children, this can be a joint conversation about what they have seen and heard in the media and how it makes them feel. They can be involved in decisions about how to think about and react to the media and whether it is helpful to limit exposure.

Don't belittle or dismiss your child's fears or worries. Comments like: "That's not scary," "You're not hurt," "Grow up and act like a big boy," will invalidate your child's experience. It is important to acknowledge your child's reality, even if their feelings seem irrational to your adult brain. For example saying, "*It feels scary to go into your dark room at night, doesn't it.*" "*Falling down surprised you, and your knee is hurting.*" "*The injection will sting for a minute, but it will be over by the time you take a deep breath.*"

Don't overwhelm your child with too much feeling discussion or too many probing questions. The trick is to acknowledge that the situation is stressful without making a big deal out of it. Too many questions or oversharing your emotional responses can actually re-stress the child. Stick to open-ended questions such as, "*how are you feeling about going back to school?*" You can plan ahead for something you think is a trigger for your child's anxiety by talking in a calm way about how your child will manage it. However, don't over-prepare your child by launching into a lengthy discussion about going to school or the doctor's office many hours before the event. This just provides extra time to key your child up; try to shorten the period of discussion around the uncomfortable feelings regarding the event or situation. Continue to make positive forecasting comments of how you believe your child will manage their worries in the future. For examples saying, "*It is okay to be afraid and nervous, other kids are too. Every time you take deep breaths and try again you are getting stronger and better at doing it.*"

DO help your child to be aware of their positive and comfortable feelings. When your child is acting in ways that are not fearful, give attention to these positive emotions and link the positive emotion to the child's particular experience. For example, saying, "*You look happy when you are playing a game with your friend.*" Or, "*You are so patient figuring out how to put that puzzle together. You are staying calm and trying another idea. I think you will solve that puzzle problem.*" Or, "*You seem relaxed reading that book.*" "*You are brave to try that high slide!*" The goal is to focus on and give attention to your child's positive emotion feeling states such as being happy, patient, calm, confident, brave, or persistent with a difficult task. Children learn to recognize and express these comfortable feelings in themselves. Then they can use them in their own positive self-talk as well as in communication with others. They recognize that they are not always fearful, angry, or anxious and remember the situations that lead to more comfortable feelings.

DO reassure your child that they are not to blame for problems that are beyond their control. Children are often confused by traumatic and stressful events such as parental fights, an accident, or someone's illness or death. They sometimes feel guilty that they caused the event to happen. It is important that children have accurate information and are told these stressful and upsetting situations are not their fault. "*I know that you're really sad and worried when we argue. I want you to know that sometimes adults get mad at each other. We are*

working hard to stay calm and talk about our problem. We both love you and are not mad at you. It is not your fault when we fight. You have not done anything wrong."

Do listen empathically and normalize feelings. Help your child understand their fears, normalize their feelings. For example, saying, *"I know you are worried about going back to school and the school work that you have missed, that's hard."* Or, *"I think a lot of people feel worried when they are trying something new."* Or, *"I can see that it's hard for you..."*

Do provide support for specific actions to help your child cope with anxiety. *"I know you're feeling worried about that assignment. Would you like help to get caught up? You will see you can do it."* *"You are feeling sad that your friend can't come over to play. Let's think what would help you feel better. Should we invite them for another time or pick a different friend?"*

Do model positive self-regulation and coping skills. Model positive self-regulation skills and ways to cope and manage frustrating situations. For example, *"Wow, I feel so worried sometimes when I listen to the news about Covid. I am going to turn off the TV and take a deep breath to calm down. I also think it would make me feel better to go for a walk. Do you want to come with me?"* *"Sometimes I am sad when I think about not being able to visit grandma. I really wish we could see her. I'm think that I'm going to call her and have a talk. It's not the same as visiting, but I think it will help me feel better."* When your child hears you describing your own feelings and how you manage them, they are learning to use these strategies themselves.

Do stay calm, relaxed and patient. It is important that you stay calm, patient, and confident when your child talks about anxious feelings or demonstrates physical responses to anxiety such as head or tummy aches. By staying calm in an anxiety producing situation, you are providing modeling for your child about how they can manage their stress. For example, saying, *"I know your heart is racing and you are feeling sweaty, but this will get better soon. Remember how last time this happened you danced and sang to your favorite music and your heart slowed down."* Here the child can be distracted to their favorite game or activity to distract themselves from what they are worrying about.

Do use physical affection. Physical affections an important way of comforting and affirming children.

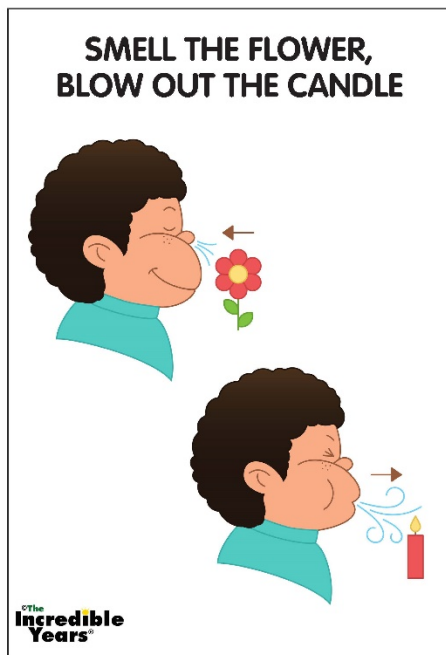
Do teach your child ways to stay calm and self-regulate with power breathing.

Self-regulation is the ability to control feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in arousing situations. One emotional self-regulation approach is to teach your child a calm down breathing method. You can demonstrate this slow breathing method with a balloon or magic rainbow breathing ball so the child can see the balloon or ball slowly get bigger like their stomach (as they breath in). Once you have demonstrated how to take a deep breath, then you can demonstrate the importance of letting go of the breath slowly by gradually letting the air out of the balloon or magic breathing ball.



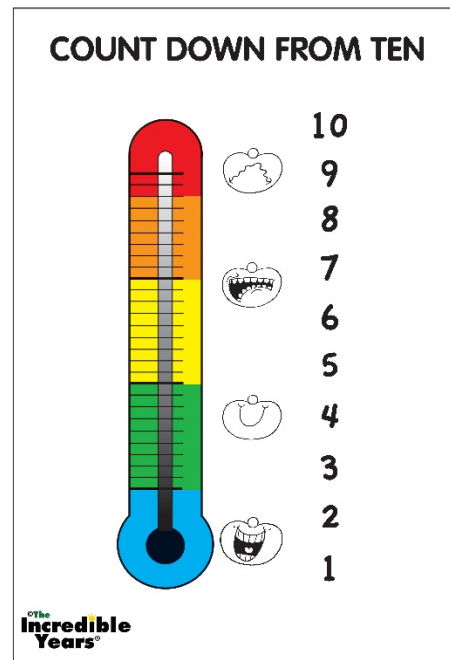
You can practice this breathing on the floor by placing a beanbag or stuffed animal on your child's stomach. Have your child put their finger on their belly button or the stuffed animal and watch their tummy rise and then fall as they breath in and out.

Another approach to teaching your child controlled breathing is to ask them to imagine they are smelling a flower when breathing in and then blowing out a candle when breathing out. Sometimes it is also helpful to count to four when breathing in and then count higher when breathing out. Using visual imagery aids such a picture of a calm down thermometer or smelling the flower and blowing out the candle can be especially helpful for young children.



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Self Regulation Cue Cards

DO teach children positive self-talk self-regulation statements. A second self-regulation strategy is to help your child use a positive power thought or word to quietly verbalize or think when they are having an anxious thought. For young children this might be one word such as saying, “calm” or “brave” or “turtle power”. Older children may use a 3-4 word sentence or mantra. You can help your child replace some of their unhappy thoughts with calming thoughts and self-regulation statements that you model such as saying, “I can calm down” or, “I can do this” or, “This will soon be better” or, “I can be brave and strong”.

*I get nervous when the teacher asks me to read in class.
I tell myself, “I can do it” or “I can stay calm” Sometimes
I take some deep breaths when I do that too.*

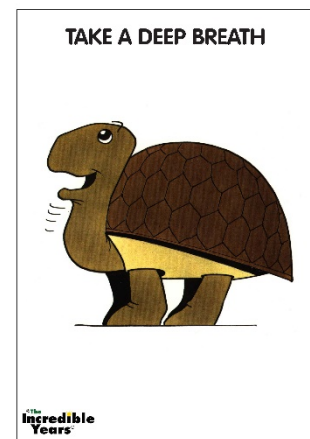
DO teach your child to use positive visualization. A third self-regulation strategy is to identify your child's happy places and calm memories. You could draw and a write a book together about times your child feels happy and loved such as swimming at the beach, reading with grandpa, eating ice cream, or going to the zoo. Once you and your child have discussed and

established these happy memories, you can guide or prompt them to think of one of their happy places and use their brave thoughts when they are feeling tense, anxious, sad or mad.

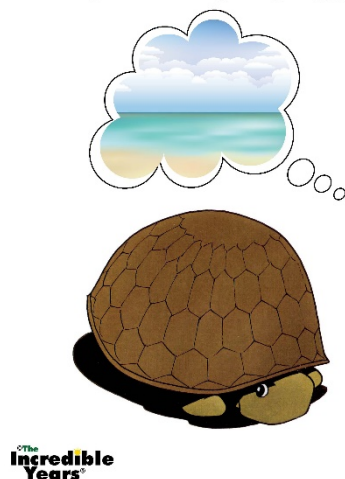
My favorite time being relaxed and happy is when I am reading with my mom. I like to think about that when I get into yellow or red and feel bad about myself.

DO teach these self-regulation strategies at a time when the child is calm and relaxed. Once your child has learned and can easily use the strategy at a calm time, you can prompt them to use one of the strategies when they are starting to get anxious. You can say, “*You are upset, let’s take some of your calm down power breaths.*”

DO use puppets to enhance young children’s learning of self-regulation strategies. Puppets are a powerful way to help young children learn to use controlled breathing to manage their anxious feelings. One of the puppets in *our Dinosaur Curriculum* called Tiny Turtle teaches children how to go in their turtle shell to take deep breaths and slowly blow out breaths so they can help their body relax. We call this “Tiny Turtle’s Turtle Power Breathing”. You can take any puppet and model this breathing method.



Inside My Shell Thinking of My Happy Place

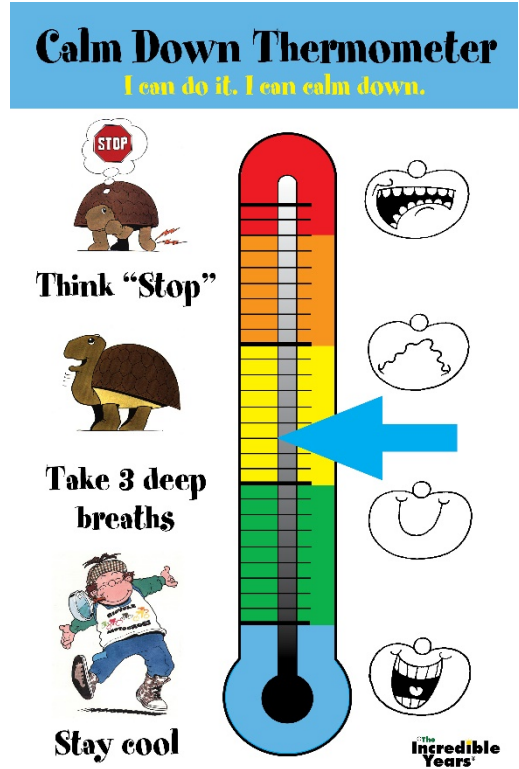


A puppet such as Tiny Turtle can also be used for this self-regulation teaching by having the puppet share the happy thoughts, places, or memories that he uses when he goes in his shell. Tiny can explain when and where he decides to use his calm down power method. Young children are not able to be introspective about their own cognitive processes and between ages 3-6 years they confuse fantasy and reality. They love pretend play and can learn well using imaginary situations. Pretend play helps them understand what others, including a puppet, might feel. Your child can practice emotional self-regulation strategies to help the puppet calm down, and then when your child is upset, your puppet could prompt your child to use the same strategies. Your child may be more responsive to the puppet’s coaching than to your parent voice.

You can use other puppets to promote your child’s practice of self-regulation thoughts and memories, feeling talk, and breathing methods. You can tailor the puppets’ experiences to situations that are real for your child. For example, your puppet could be stressed at school, afraid to talk about making a mistake, nervous about meeting new people, or having a vaccination. Your child will likely show empathy for the puppet’s feelings. The puppets can ask your child for ideas to respond to each of these situations. You can prompt your child to

show the puppet what to do to calm down and feeling better. This helps children to normalize their own anxious thoughts and feelings around a stressful event and opens up further possibility of your child feeling safe to talk about their own fears and worries with others.

Do use the Calm Down thermometer to self-monitor. For young children a laminated “calm down thermometer” can provide a visual representation of the intensity of feelings and how the feelings can change from negative (angry, frustrated, sad) feelings into more positive ones. The thermometer has an arrow that your child can move to represent whether they feel calm or cool at the bottom of the scale, worried or nervous in the middle, or in the “red hot mad” zone at the top. Your puppet can help your child practice determining how strong their emotion is by discussing feelings caused by different events and determining what color they are on the thermometer. You can help your child practice moving down the arrow from red hot feelings in the “danger zone” into calmer feelings (blue or green) on the thermometer. This is when you will practice using some of the self-regulation skills such as positive imagery, thinking happy thoughts, telling themselves they can calm down and taking slow, deep breaths or doing some muscle relaxation exercises. Physically moving the arrow down as feelings change is a useful way for your child to have an external marker of the internal self-regulation process. You can use the thermometer to help your child’s notice as they begin to feel upset (yellow zone). This provides an opportunity to use a calm-down strategy before they are too upset (red zone) to be able to think clearly. You can help older children rank the intensity of their emotions from 1-10. It is easier for a child who is moderately upset (at a 5 on the scale) to use a self-regulation strategy than when they are already at the top of the dysregulation scale.



Do acknowledge and praise your child for staying calm and using a self-regulation strategy. When your child manages a stressful situation with deep breathing, positive self-talk, staying patient, or using a calming ritual such as singing or listening to music, praise your child and give positive attention. Be sincere, genuine, and specific about what you are praising. For example, *“I noticed that when you were frustrated you took some deep breaths and tried again. You are learning to be patient with yourself.”* Or, *“Remember last time this happened, you felt worried at first, but then you tried and found out you could do it.”*

Do problem solve. If your child has an emotional meltdown, later you can revisit the situation in an accepting and brief way. Help your child think about what happened and what their feelings were. Then encourage them to problem solve how they will handle the situation differently next time. Perhaps you can use this as an opportunity to practice one of the self-regulation solutions they will use.

Do set up play dates and encourage peer interactions. If children are anxious and withdrawn, it is important to encourage social interaction such as play, cooperative games, and activities. This helps them see that these activities can lead to positive feelings and helps them feel a sense of belonging and support. Being with other children will help your child feel less alone and help reduce their feelings of anxiety or fear. You will need to help scaffold and support your child in these social interactions, at first, so that they feel safe, supported, connected and more in control. For example, when they are playing with a friend, you might say, *“You shared with your friend, that is friendly, and your both look like you are feeling happy playing with each other.”*

Do provide stability and consistency in your daily routine. When children are anxious and unhappy, it is tempting to help them feel better by avoiding limit setting. For example, you might alter your routines by letting them stay up later to watch a TV program, allow extra computer time, or give them a special treat. However, sticking to predictable and consistent household rules and routines is still very important. When the home feels stable and secure, children develop the emotional resources to deal with the less predictable world outside. Moreover, healthy eating and sleep habits and ongoing daily physical activity contribute importantly to your child’s resiliency in approaching stressful situations.

Do praise, reinforce, and celebrate as your child makes progress. You can give out stickers or other meaningful rewards to your child for using a self-regulation strategy to manage a strong feeling. You can say, *“You are becoming a person who can really control your fears well. You are strong inside.”*

Summary

The above ideas will help encourage your child to express both comfortable and uncomfortable feelings and normalize and cope with their anxious thoughts and feelings. You can help your child learn that talking about their feelings will help them to feel less anxious, fearful, guilty, sad, or alone and more loved, confident, and patient. Strive to be patient and be a model for promoting emotion self-regulation skills and scaffold your child’s belief that they can manage these anxious times with confidence. Through your coaching and praise, you will help your child build a positive self-image and perceive themselves as someone who is becoming successful and resilient at handling their uncomfortable emotions in challenging situations.