



## Responding to Anxiety in Children: What you can do as a parent

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In the previous article I cited the work of Professor Patrick McGorry and his colleagues in The Lancet Psychiatry Commission highlighting the mental health crisis facing our young people.

McGorry's Commission highlights several factors contributing to the current mental health crisis among Australian youth. Social media exposure, climate anxiety, and what they term "global megatrends" are creating unprecedented pressures on developing minds.<sup>1</sup> As parents, you're navigating uncharted territory—our children face challenges we never encountered at their age.

This reality means we need to be more vigilant than previous generations about recognising early warning signs. The old approach of "they'll grow out of it" is no longer sufficient when dealing with the current epidemic of childhood anxiety.

Here's where I want to emphasise something crucial: research shows that when significant adults in a child's life learn how to respond appropriately to anxiety, their intervention can be as effective as professional psychological treatment for mild to moderate anxiety levels.<sup>1</sup> This means that as parents, you have more power than you might realise to help your child develop coping skills.

However, many parents hesitate to intervene because they worry about being "mean" or making things worse. This is misguided thinking. Teaching children to challenge anxious thoughts and face manageable fears isn't cruel—it's essential preparation for life's inevitable challenges. As I often say, it's better to prepare the child for the road rather than the road for the child.

### Red Flags That Warrant Professional Help

While many children can manage anxiety with family support, certain warning signs indicate the need for professional intervention:

- Anxiety that persists despite consistent family support and doesn't improve over several weeks
- Severe avoidance behaviours that significantly disrupt school attendance or family functioning
- Physical symptoms such as chest pain, difficulty breathing, or panic attacks
- Any mention of self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- Anxiety that's accompanied by depression, eating disorder behaviours, or substance use.

The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety entirely—that's neither possible nor desirable. Instead, we want to help children develop what I call "robustification" skills. This involves teaching them to recognise anxious thoughts, question their validity, and develop practical coping strategies.

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Start by helping your child understand that anxiety is a normal human emotion that everyone experiences. Normalise the feeling while teaching them that they don't have to be controlled by it. Encourage problem-solving rather than avoidance and model calm responses to stress in your own life.

Create predictable routines and environments that foster a sense of security, whilst gradually exposing your child to manageable challenges that build confidence. Remember, building resilience is like strengthening a muscle—it requires consistent, progressive effort.

Given the scale of the mental health crisis documented by McGorry and his colleagues, we can't afford to wait for symptoms to become severe before acting. Early recognition and intervention are our best tools for helping children develop the resilience they'll need to navigate an increasingly complex world.

As parents and community members, we have a responsibility to become more skilled at recognising anxiety in children and responding effectively. This isn't about creating a generation of anxious parents, but rather about equipping ourselves with the knowledge and tools needed to support our children's mental health in challenging times.

By learning to recognise anxiety early and responding with appropriate support for your child, we can help reverse the troubling trajectory that McGorry's research has identified and give our children the tools they need to thrive.

#### **References:**

1. McGorry, P.D., Mei, C., Dalal, N., et al. (2024). *The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on youth mental health*. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 11(9), 731-774.
2. Creswell, C., Parkinson, M., Thirwall, K., & Willetts, L. (2017). *Parent led CBT for child anxiety*. Guilford Press: New York.

- Healthdirect Australia: <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/anxiety-in-children>
- Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne: <https://www.rch.org.au/anxiety/>
- Parents' Shop Parent resources: <https://www.parentshop.com.au/for-parents/>
- Australian Psychological Society – Find a psychologist: <https://psychology.org.au/find-a-psychologist>