

Special Needs: Anxiety & How to Manage

Kristen Morgan
SBTC Special Needs Consultant
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Anxiety

- ▶ An internalizing symptom, meaning that it occurs inside of our bodies as both physical feelings and anxious thoughts.

- ▶ Example: a child who is anxious about COVID-19 may have physical symptoms - upset stomach, racing heart - as well as negative thoughts - “What if I get the disease?”

Covid-19 & Children with Special Needs: How to Manage Anxiety article written by Dr. Jamie Barstein, child clinical psychologist at The Help Group

- ▶ There are essentially three components of anxiety:

- ▶ **Cognition (thoughts):** Children with anxiety tend to perceive danger and threats readily. They experience false alarms, overestimate the probability of catastrophe, and underestimate their ability to cope and survive.
- ▶ **Physical symptoms:** These include heart pounding, sweating, tension, difficulty breathing, nausea, stomach upset, and/or insomnia.
- ▶ **Behaviors:** Children exit a situation as soon as they perceive danger or have uncomfortable physical symptoms.

Helping A Child with Anxiety By Janneta K. Bohlander, L.M.F.T, Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities

Anxiety & Disabilities

- ▶ It is estimated that up to 40% of individuals with autism experience anxiety, and studies have reported similar rates in individuals with intellectual disabilities.
- ▶ Anxiety is one of the most common emotional problems among children with LD and ADHD.
- ▶ For a child who is high-functioning autistic, a parent might have to point out social queues. For a handicapped child, their anxiety might be brought on by watching their friends surpass them in gym class. A stutterer may experience a stomach ache every Thursday at 10 am, when their French orals are recited in front of the class.
- ▶ No matter what the cause of their anxiety, children with special needs may feel that they already are at a disadvantage.

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Helping your Child Cope with Anxiety if They Have Special Needs By Yenny Rojas, Children's Health Care

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Anxiety & Disabilities

- ▶ Children with anxiety who also have special needs may find it hard to prioritize tasks, meaning that everything is important or nothing is.
 - ▶ They may require help with their executive function skills, prioritizing what is important and where to start.
- ▶ Often anxiety is overlooked in younger children with special needs because they internalize the burden.
- ▶ Helping a child with anxiety involves prioritizing their mental well-being, employing strategies to address their issues, and seeking professional help if necessary.

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What to look for (possible signs):

- ▶ Many children with developmental disabilities regardless of language level have difficulty communicating their thoughts or describing their physical feelings in their body.
 - ▶ changes in behaviors such as sleeping and eating habits
 - ▶ disruptive or aggressive behaviors
 - ▶ increasingly irritable or quick to react

How to Manage

▶ Practice on how to stay calm

- ▶ Try breathing in through your mouth for 3 full seconds, holding your breath for 1-2 seconds then breathing out through your mouth for 3 full seconds.
- ▶ Using visuals or muscle relaxation videos

- ▶ <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=pmr+video+for+kids&docid=608030165998373119&mid=E2D9A353281B7735FC86E2D9A353281B7735FC86&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>

▶ Brave Thoughts

- ▶ practicing affirming thoughts can instill a sense of self-confidence, such as saying “I am brave” or “I can do this.” Create a list of positive thoughts with the child for them to look to in moments of high anxiety.

▶ Take Control of Anxiety by creating a “worry bug” or “worry bully” that can be defeated by the superhero they create

▶ Maintaining routine

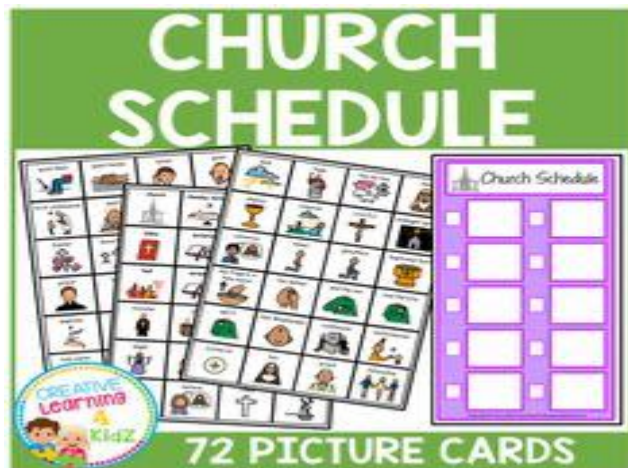
▶ Physical Activity



Don't Forget about the parents!

- ▶ <https://www.verywellfamily.com/parent-disability-stress-tips-2162645>
- ▶ <https://www.special-learning.com/article/depression>

What can we do to help?



ANXIETY VS. TRUTH!

Whenever you experience anxiety, your mind might begin to race with thoughts that aren't always true. Anxious thoughts are often focused on the worst possible outcome. These thoughts can lead you to believe that things are worse than they actually are and that you are not capable of coping with it. In the thought clouds, write a few anxious thoughts that you are experiencing, then try to challenge those thoughts by identifying what is actually true about your situation.

The worksheet features four thought clouds on the left, each with an orange arrow pointing to a rectangular box on the right. The boxes are intended for writing or drawing. At the bottom left is the 'my4marks' logo, and at the bottom right is a small copyright notice: '© 2014 Rights reserved by my4marks.com. All rights reserved. Images are the property of their respective owners.' The background is white with a blue border.

What can we do to help?

- ▶ <https://www.rwjbh.org/documents/wellness/CSH-COVID19-Helpful-Tips-2020.pdf>
- ▶ https://www.starautismsupport.com/sites/default/files/Hand-Washing%20Routine_0.pdf
- ▶ encouraging the child to stretch their arms and legs; exercises
 - ▶ <https://www.romper.com/p/10-online-exercise-yoga-kid-classes-to-make-up-for-pe-22627985>
- ▶ use a “fidget” (e.g., a stress ball, putty, fidget toys) to help with attention and focus
 - ▶ <https://www.healthline.com/health/fidget-toys-for-anxiety#takeaway>
- ▶ try to limit distractions in the child’s environment

COVID-19



Helpful Tips for Parents and Caregivers of Children with Disabilities and Special Health Needs

- ▶ Changes in routine may be confusing for your child and lead to feelings they can't describe or understand such as fear and frustration. Behavior changes sometimes may occur. Providing a comfortable and predictable environment may help your child feel safe and in control. Spend time together doing things your child enjoys.
- ▶ Your child may have difficulty with the change in schedule and/or the environment. Help your child to keep busy throughout the day. Try to keep a structure in your child's day:
 - Establish consistent schedules for waking up, meals, play, school work, chores, physical activity, bedtime, and other routines
 - Arrange designated time for those using computers and other electronic devices
 - Find books, games, and projects your child enjoys
 - Take some time to get fresh air and connect with nature
- ▶ Your child may not understand why schools are closed. Explain that in order to help keep everyone healthy, sometimes students have to stay home instead of going to their school. Let them know it is still important to do their homework and that the school staff will let everyone know when they can come back to school. In the meantime, reassure your child that he or she is safe at home.
- ▶ There is so much information that is being shared about COVID-19. It might be helpful to limit your child's exposure to news and social media to filter what they are hearing. Help put things into your child's perspective using simple facts they can understand. Managing your own reactions may help reduce any anxiety that your child may be feeling.
- ▶ Your child may miss friends and family. Stay connected with family and friends by phone or through other electronic devices.
- ▶ It is alright to reach out to others to get the support you need.

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Helpful Resources

- ▶ What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety workbook by Dawn Huebner
- ▶ Freeing Your Child from Anxiety book by Dr. Tamar Chansky
- ▶ Superflex: A Superhero Social Thinking Curriculum autism specific program by Stephanie Madrigal and Michelle Garcia Winner
- ▶ Facing Your Fears anxiety treatment program by Judy Reaven, Audrey Blakeley-Smith, Shana Nichols, and Susan Hepburn
- ▶ <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>
- ▶ Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life, book by Dr. Shanker