

# Managing Academic Anxiety

## Elementary school

In any given school year, children may experience feelings of anxiety from daily activities, such as homework, testing or being called on in class. While some anxiety can be helpful and motivating, it can become an issue when it interferes with everyday functioning.



**Anxiety** is a normal feeling of nervousness, worry or uneasiness that everyone experiences throughout their lives.

**Academic anxiety** is a specific type of worry associated with school-related responsibilities and pressures.

## Talking about academic anxiety

## Signs of academic anxiety

While anxiety can look different in every child, here are some general signs to watch out for:

- Complaining of frequent headaches, stomachaches or other physical pain with no known medical cause.
- Avoiding school or certain classes (e.g., refusing to get dressed or trying to miss the bus).
- Worrying about school and no longer making time for activities they used to enjoy, including social interactions.
- Showing changes in sleep or eating habits.
- Showing changes in mood, such as appearing to be “on edge,” irritable or tearful.
- Acting out in class (e.g., being the class clown, getting in fights or talking back).
- Having an “I don’t care” attitude about anything related to school.
- Sweating, shaking or fast breathing when thinking or talking about school.

### Communication Tip    Instead of saying ...    Try saying ...

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<b>Ask open-ended questions</b> and allow your child to share their honest feelings.	“Are you worried you won’t do well on that assignment?”	“How are you feeling about that test?”
<b>Acknowledge their feelings</b> so your child feels understood.	“Don’t worry about it—you’ll be fine!”	“I can tell this is important to you and that you’re feeling overwhelmed.”
<b>Help your child learn to manage their feelings</b> , not avoid them.	“I know you’re nervous to read out loud in front of your class. I’ll email your teacher to ask if they can skip you”	“It’s normal to feel nervous. Let’s take a few deep breaths together, and then you can practice with me to help you feel more prepared.”

# Maintaining healthy routines

Consistent routines help children know what to expect, allowing them to feel more secure, calm and focused.

- **Nutrition:** Children need to fuel their bodies to fuel their minds. Drinking water and eating balanced meals and snacks help kids pay better attention in school.
- **Sleep:** It's much easier to retain and recall information after a good night's sleep. Keep digital screens out of the bedroom, and turn them off an hour before bed to get better-quality rest.
- **Balance:** Encourage children to explore other interests and hobbies so that school is not their only focus.
- **Play:** Kids need unstructured time to play, unwind, be creative and relax. Taking breaks and being active can improve a child's ability to focus and do well in school.



If you are concerned your child may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety that go beyond what is normal and tolerable, talk to your child's pediatrician or school counselor about additional support that may be available.

# Practicing relaxation strategies

It's difficult for anyone to learn something new when they are anxious, angry or distracted, so try to introduce new relaxation (or coping) strategies when everyone is calm. A skill that works one day might not work the next, so encourage your child to try different strategies to help build a coping skills toolbox.

## Deep breathing

Deep breathing is a coping skill that can improve our ability to concentrate and better handle our emotions by slowing down our heart rate, allowing our muscles to relax and calming our minds and bodies.

### How to practice deep breathing:

1. Put your hand on your stomach so you can feel your stomach as it fills with air.
2. Inhale slowly through your nose.
3. Feel your stomach fill with air and hold your breath for a few seconds.
4. Exhale slowly through your mouth.
5. Repeat several times.

Tracing shapes can help you focus on your breathing. Use this triangle shape to practice.

