

4 Ways to Help Your Anxious Kid

First, acknowledge ways the coronavirus has changed their lives.



By Jessica Grose

- April 1, 2020



When I spoke to her for [last week's newsletter about long-term effects](#) of the coronavirus pandemic on children, Rahil Briggs, Psy.D., mentioned the metaphor of the dandelion and the orchid. [It's a theory developed by Dr. Thomas Boyce, M.D.](#), a pediatrician and researcher, and it posits that the vast majority of children are “dandelions” — pretty resilient and able to deal with stress as it comes.

But, Dr. Boyce estimates about 20 percent of children are “orchids.” As he [described them on NPR's “Fresh Air” in 2019](#), “the orchid child is the child who shows great sensitivity and susceptibility to both bad and good environments.” They may be more sensitive because of a combination of biological and environmental reasons.

You know if you have an orchid, and he may be struggling more than usual right now, with all of the changes this pandemic has wrought on his quotidian life. Dr. Boyce's research shows that orchids thrive on regular routines — routines that have had to be rejiggered considerably in the past month or two. I spoke to experts about what you can do to help your anxious children right now. Though these methods are geared toward orchids, they can work on your upset dandelions as well.

Label what's happening. Just acknowledging the recent changes to your children's lives can feel validating, said Becky Kennedy, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in New York City. “With young kids, you can keep an ongoing list of things that have changed and things that have stayed the same,” Dr. Kennedy said. Brainstorm this list verbally with your kids — for example, “You used to go to a school building, that has changed, but you still have Mommy tucking you in every night, that's the same.” By doing so, it will make

them feel less alone in their feelings, because they'll know they're not the only one noticing that things aren't the way they used to be.

Resolve your own anxiety. We have [given this advice before](#), so apologies for being a broken record. But several of the experts we spoke to emphasized that parents' anxiety can make kids feel unsettled. "Our kids are brilliant emotional detectives of their parents," said Abi Gewirtz, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Minnesota, and the author of the forthcoming book, "When the World Feels Like a Scary Place: Essential Conversations for Anxious Parents and Worried Kids." If you are showing your anxiety, "it can leach out into interactions" with your children, Dr. Gewirtz said. The Times [put together 10 tips for easing your anxiety](#).

Teach children mindfulness techniques. Progressive muscle relaxation — where you tense and then release individual groups of muscles — can be helpful for anxious kids, said Dunya Poltorak, Ph.D., a pediatric medical psychologist in private practice in Birmingham, Mich. The University of Washington has [a progressive muscle-relaxing script just for little ones](#) that you can read to your children. [GoZen!](#), an organization that helps children manage their anxiety, [has a YouTube video](#) that can also help guide your kids through progressive muscle relaxation.

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Another behavioral technique that can make children feel better is deep breathing, Dr. Poltorak said — here are some [deep breathing exercises from Jamie](#), our [Cosmic Kids Yoga queen](#).

Create a schedule with pictures. Predictability is very important for anxious children, said Sally Beville Hunter, Ph.D., a clinical assistant professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and one way to soothe kids who don't read yet is to make a schedule that has images depicting the routine of the day. "I don't think having really detailed schedules is necessary or even helpful," Dr. Hunter said. We're all overwhelmed right now, so don't worry about making some elaborate plan that would be impossible to execute. "It can be as simple as, here are four things we do every day": breakfast, lunch, dinner, cuddles.

P.S. [Click here to read all NYT Parenting coverage on coronavirus](#). Follow us on Instagram [@NYTParenting](#). Join [us on Facebook](#). Find [us on Twitter](#) for the latest updates.

Editors' Picks

P.P.S. We want to hear from you: are you or your partner quarantined away from your children? [Email us here](#). We also want to hear what you're doing for self-care as a parent right now — [drop us a line](#).

In last week's newsletter, we incorrectly cited the degrees of Rahil Briggs. We regret the error.

Want More on Kids and Anxiety?

- The Times's excellent children's book editor, Maria Russo, has [nine book recommendations to help calm an anxious toddler or preschooler](#).
 - If your child has specific phobias, our frequent contributor [Melinda Wenner Moyer has tips for combating their fears](#).
 - Studies [show that exercise really helps](#) to quell anxiety in children of all ages. The Cut has some suggestions for physical activities [for little kids here](#), and after a long rainy weekend indoors, I'm considering investing in one of these small indoor trampoline deals to keep my kids from going completely bonkers. The Wirecutter, a product recommendation site from The New York Times, recommends [The Original Toy Company Fold & Go Trampoline](#).
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Tiny Victories

Parenting can be a grind. Let's celebrate the tiny victories.

I cuddled my little girl while I was having a conference call (of course she fell asleep). Best conference call ever! — *Yuriko Zhao, Amherst, N.Y.*

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