

PAC Speaker on Anxiety: Strategies for taming the worry dragon  
Sandra Clark  
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Taming Worry Dragons program  
Program developed by Jane Garland and Sandra Clark  
Workbooks, classroom manuals,

Dealing with anxious kids: use imagination and metaphors - tools to slay the worry dragon and fight back.

Use imagination reconceptualization

It externalizes the problem, by identifying it as separate and naming it ("worry dragon", "worry monster".) Kids learn how to tame it.

Reframes anxiety problems: the dragon can be seen as trying to trick the child into believing mistruths and creating doubt.

Allows child to talk about worries - show a picture of a child with pains, heart beating hard etc. Ask what happens to them. Talk about the sneaky worry dragons that can jump out on you and make you feel this way.

Encourages a playful, humorous state of mind.

Anxiety can show up in different places in the child's life, so children can look like different individuals in different situations.

Often anxious kids don't see the connections between life experiences e.g. pains and the anxious habits. Teaching the connection is important. Learn which is the first sign of worry for your child.

Then learn tools to stop the worry dragon in its tracks. e.g. relaxation, talking back to worries, trapping the dragon, positive self-talk.

Practice the tools, like learning any skill.

Tell the child they will have support - they are the head of the team.

Not "we are going to fix you". Talk in a very different way that involves the child in the process. Not that it is a problem.

### **Engaging the reluctant child: motivating**

Anxious children tend to be suspicious of new ideas or actions and difficult to motivate.

Appeal to your child's pride e.g. worries tend to be bright and imaginative. This has led to an ability to see the most unexpected dangers. Need to turn this into a talent for taming/trapping the worries.

The physical symptoms that the child has are real and legitimate.

Ask child to describe the dragon(s). Then together as a team you can fight the worry dragon.

Some kids say they are fine and don't want to fight. Then make a list with your child about the ways anxiety is interfering with their life. Anxiety causes fear, sadness, crying and fighting. It stops participation in activities.

Then make a positive list of the feelings and things she can do when she is the boss of anxiety (e.g. sleepover)

Be playful and use humour.

Resistance is a natural and instinctive way to behave - kids are likely to be resistant at first. Keep bringing it up. Take the time for kids to warm up to the idea. The kids tend to be more calm and able to talk about it once they think about the idea. Over time they will start to talk about it. It's OK if they don't talk about it to start. Assume there is some anxiety, and move forward.

### **Strategies for parents**

Parents often feel angry when their own anxiety or their child's anxiety is triggered. "Why can't they just do this?"

Parents can direct their anger at the worry rather than the child. "It looks like the worry dragons have snuck up on us tonight." Then both child and parent are then on the same side in a battle against a common enemy.

Flexibility and frustration tolerance are skills to learn. Anxious children need a bit more patience and time to adjust to a new environment. Prep the child for a change, and talk about tricking the worry dragon.

Adults are more able to adapt than children are, so can prepare ahead.

Watch for warning signals and interpret behaviours at face value.

Say "Looks like the worry dragons are here again..." Not: "tell me what you are worried about", but "you know there is anxiety coming, so let's do something different this time."

Introduce new things one step at a time. Kids will be able to be flexible and adjust, but just need more time to move out of their comfort zone.

Pretend to be calm, even if you are not. If your anxiety escalates, it escalates it fast in kids too. Even as a parent if you are petrified, show them confidence and calm. Choose strengths as parents and play off each other if you can.

Deep breathing. Mindfulness exercises good for parents to stay calm first.

Muscle relaxation and tension exercises. Can do in a few minutes, or even seconds, to get into the right frame of mind to deal with an anxious child.

Breathing is rarely the first tool for the kids, unless they are well connected between body and mind.

Hlt is hard for them to bring their physical state to their attention.

Calm thoughts - use positive self talk or generate alternative thoughts. For children, their worry thinking is very negative ("I am lousy at math. If I get a B I might as well just drop out".) Try to shift them to: "I did all my homework so I am ready for that test tomorrow."

Negative thinking limits anxious kids from feeling confident and brave to try new things.

Visualize trapping/shrinking/erasing the worry dragon. "You are the boss of those worry dragons. How are you going to trap it?" Lots of imagination in devising ways of getting rid of the dragon.

Kids learn the cues of when the worry dragons are coming, and how they will control them when they do.

Remind ourselves that laughter is a great relaxation tool. It helps us relax our bodies. "I let the worry dragons get me that time. I am going to sing a silly song to make them go away." Including yourself in the laughter is important.

Anxious kids are often on the serious side, so a sense of humour is useful.

Confidence building - stay calm. Trust that your kids will be successful.

### **Facing the fear**

You have to face the anxiety to overcome it. It does not feel good at first, but once kids know it is not dangerous, they are more able to face it.

Children must face their worries, rather than avoid them all their life.

Maybe you are overprotective, or giving too little reassurance that it will be OK. But avoiding worry strengthens anxious beliefs in a child.

If your child is constantly asking for reassurance it probably indicates that they are not developing confidence in their own abilities to cope.

Kids need to experience and tolerate anxiety in order to build coping muscles.

Ask kids to try trapping their dragon/telling it to go away, not "you must do this, it is going to work." It is building trust and confidence that they can manage this.

Rewards are really important. Rewards need to be specific, given soon after the child has been brave, and in proportion to the level of fear faced. (e.g. choosing movie, dessert).

### **Expectations for change**

It's slow! Give each strategy a fair try. And don't institute changes when there are other stressors in your family life.

Effectiveness of strategies varies from child to child.

Combinations of strategies will be most helpful. Add approaches, rather than abandon them when adaptability seems very slow e.g. "we tried thought stopping, and it didn't keep those worry dragons away, so what else can we add to keep them away?"

Be aware of how change is measured: in small, doable, steps.

### **When to seek additional help**

Anxiety is overly problematic and interferes with child's daily functioning.

Occurs too frequently.

Anxiety is significantly affecting sleep, eating etc.

Worries are more extreme and intrusive compared to other children.

### **Be realistic**

We are not going to "fix/cure" these kids. Coping rather than cure model.

Impairment often increased by anxious family members.

Lifelong strategies required.

Anxiety tends to wax and wane, often with changes of routine, including getting out of school for the summer.

Empower the child.

### **Summary: tools and challenges**

Take child's concerns seriously, while expressing confidence in ability to overcome anxious feelings.

Avoid anger.

Gentle encouragement with gradual approach to face worries.

Coping tools take time to learn and require practice and modelling.

Don't forget common sense: food, exercise, sleep, downtime etc

Notice and focus on successes and brave behaviour.

Praise is the best reward.

### **Questions from parents**

Difference between anxiety and stress. They are highly interrelated. Strategies here are good for both. With anxiety need to get at underlying fear.

Fears can be increased by current events. Be very vigilant about what kids see and hear on the TV and internet and in movies.