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## Tips for Calming Anxious Kids

One mom's go-to techniques for coaxing anxiety-prone children out of their fears

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Anyone who's met me knows that I'm the homeschooling mother of six smart, funny, adventurous, noisy children ranging from infant to teenager. Many people also know that my oldest son has multiple special needs, my 6-year-old struggles with [Asperger's](#) and [ADHD](#), and my 4-year-old is allergic to everything. Okay, maybe I'm a little bit off the grid. But what might be not be at all uncommon about my family is that our greatest challenge — more than allergies, [developmental delays](#) or even homeschooling — is [anxiety](#).

Anxiety is what drives my 7-year-old daughter into my room nearly every night. It's what [prevents the lights from being 100 per cent off](#) in any bedroom (much to my husband's dismay). It's what causes my sons to slink around the house if they've broken something or if they've had an accident, because they just can't bear to tell us about it. It causes little [lies](#) and big [tantrums](#). Anxiety is why certain of my kids need to play with [babysitters](#) half a dozen times before they are left alone with them, and why we arm relatives — even grandparents — with a list of what-ifs and just-in-cases a mile long.

Sound familiar? Then consider us a test site for a highly developed “toolbox” for dealing with anxiety-prone children. With innumerable opportunities for trial and error, we've found the following disarmingly [simple techniques to be highly effective](#) and we've passed them on to babysitters who've successfully deployed them. We predict that they will work for you, and your sitters, too.

## 1. The gasp and distract

“Whoa! I think I saw a bat outside!” has been a key phrase test-driven by parents and then used by friends and family throughout the toddler years when a kid wakes up from a nap sobbing that I’m not home. The bat, instead of causing more anxiety, apparently shocks my toddlers into craning their necks to see supposed bat flying around our sunny Texas backyard.

## 2. The silly song

Sung enthusiastically to one toddler while ignoring the other, of course. “Little Bunny Foo-Foo” and “Where is Thumbkin” have been among the most successful at bringing giggles to the surface.

## 3. The indirect compliment

The indirect part is important here. Everyone has seen a small child hide behind their mother when addressed by an adult. But have you ever walked in a room to, “Wow, who made these roasted carrots? They’re amazing!” and felt an instant kinship with the party guest who had unknowingly praised your cooking? “Wow, who made this Lego airplane?” Try asking a sibling or parent within earshot for maximum effectiveness.

## 4. The damsel in distress

“Ugh, how do I open this Play-Doh?” It’s amazing how quickly nervousness can be forgotten in the rush to help and, with five boys, there’s usually no shortage of knights in shining-yet-slightly-sticky armor.

## 5. Loud errors

“Wow, I really love what Ian drew here,” I said loudly to Margaret while Adam pretended not to hear from another room. “This dinosaur is really scary!” Well, that was too much for Adam — he simply had to see what we were discussing and then loudly correct me that it was a robot, and that he did it, and before he knew it he had forgotten about being nervous of our dinner company.

## 6. The injury

As long as it’s your own injury. Nobody in our family can resist a scrape, a stubbed toe or a band aid. No blood necessary.

## 7. A snack

Need I go further?

## 8. Making a snack

Some easy and fun suggestions include “ants on a log” (celery covered in peanut butter and dotted with raisins), peanut butter, jelly and banana “hot dogs” in a bun, and homemade popcorn (for something that doesn’t involve peanut butter).

## 9. Go outside

And play. Don’t pull up a chair, don’t stand there and wait for nervous kids to take the lead. Our most successful caregivers have initiated a game of tag, a chalk mural, jumping on the trampoline or even the occasional cannonball into the pool.

## 10. Pretend to buy their love

For new sitters or especially unusual situations (where I absolutely cannot be bothered for a few hours), I leave a secret bag of treats for after I’ve left. Balloons, new crayons, Tootsie Pops, bubbles, a new game — something I know is going to totally distract them and kill some time. If the kids tell me all about *the sitter’s* awesome surprises when I get home, I won’t tell. I have as much stake in this working out as the sitter does.

## 11. Break glass only in case of emergency

Nothing’s working? Feeling desperate? Open (cringe) a screen and ask about “this game called Minecraft.” Start styling an American Girl doll’s hair (wince). Pull out some paint and paper. Tell a knock-knock joke. Dig in the dirt and find some worms. Break out the water guns. But once you’ve gone here, you’re in for the long haul, my friend.