Before You Respond:

5 Questions to Ask Yourself

5 questions to ask yourself when your child's anxiety gets tough

The Parent Insight® Pod | The Thinking Pod

When your child is anxious, overwhelmed, angry or distressed, it's natural to want to do something immediately.

To reassure them. To fix the problem. To make the feeling go away.

But sometimes, in our urgency to help, we respond to our own discomfort rather than what our child actually needs.

Before you respond, take a moment to get curious.

1. Whose anxiety am I responding to?
2. Is it my child's anxiety, or is their distress triggering anxiety in me?

Sometimes we rush to reassure, rescue or solve because we are finding their feelings difficult to tolerate.

1. Ask yourself: Am I responding to what my child needs, or am I trying to make us both feel better quickly?
2. What might be happening underneath this behaviour?

Anxiety doesn't always look like fear.

It can look like anger, avoidance, defiance, withdrawal, tears or a need to control everything.

Ask yourself: What might my child be feeling, fearing or struggling to communicate through their behaviour?

Am I helping my child manage anxiety, or helping them avoid it?

Removing discomfort can bring immediate relief. But when avoidance becomes the main way of coping, anxiety can grow stronger.

This doesn't mean forcing your child into situations they're not ready for or ignoring genuine difficulties.

Ask yourself: Is my response helping my child develop confidence and capacity, or unintentionally teaching them that they cannot cope?

Does my child need an answer, or do they need to feel understood?

When children are distressed, we often move straight into explanations, advice and reassurance.

But sometimes they're not looking for a solution. They need someone to recognise how difficult things feel.

Ask yourself: Have I really listened and tried to understand before offering a solution?

What am I communicating about my child's ability to cope?

Our words matter, but so do our actions, facial expressions and tone of voice.

When we repeatedly step in, take over or communicate our own fear, we may unintentionally send the message that our child cannot manage.

Ask yourself: Am I communicating confidence in my child's developing abilities while letting them know they have my support?

Remember: Connection before correction. Curiosity before conclusions.

You don't have to remove every difficult feeling.

You don't have to have all the answers.

And you certainly don't have to respond perfectly every time.

Sometimes the most powerful thing you can do is slow down, notice what's happening within yourself, and become curious about what's happening for your child.

Your child doesn't need you to be anxiety-free. They need you to be willing to understand their anxiety, and your own.

The Thinking Pod

Helping parents understand what's happening beneath the behaviour.

The Parent Insight® Pod:

When Anxiety Gets Tough

20 things to say when your child is struggling and you don't know what to say next.

The idea is to give you practical, therapist-informed scripts you can turn to in difficult moments, without having to think of the right words when you're anxious yourself.

Important

These scripts aren't about making anxiety disappear. They're about helping you respond in ways that communicate safety, understanding and confidence, without automatically reinforcing avoidance or reassurance-seeking.

It's not just what you say. It's what happens between you.

There are no magic words that will take your child's anxiety away.

And sometimes the most helpful thing you can say is very little.

Your tone, your expression, your ability to remain curious and your willingness to tolerate difficult feelings alongside your child can be just as important as the words you choose.

These scripts are starting points, not sentences you have to memorise. Adapt them to your child's age, understanding and individual needs.

You don't need to get it right every time.

Scripts

When your child is panicking

> "I can see this feels really frightening right now. I'm here with you. We don't need to work everything out this minute. Let's just focus on what's happening right now."

Why it helps: Offers emotional containment without dismissing the child's experience or demanding they calm down.

When your child refuses to go to school

> "I know school feels really difficult right now, and I want to understand what's making it feel so hard. We're going to work through this together. You don't have to figure it all out on your own."

Why it helps: Acknowledges distress without immediately agreeing that school must be avoided. A return-to-school plan may need adjustments and support.

When your child constantly asks for reassurance

> "I've noticed that even when I answer your question, the worry comes back again. I wonder if anxiety is asking for certainty that neither of us can really have. What do you think might help you manage that uncertainty?"

Why it helps: Begins to interrupt the reassurance cycle while encouraging reflection.

When your child says, "What if something bad happens?"

> "That's a frightening thought, isn't it? Sometimes our minds imagine things that could happen and make them feel as though they will happen. Having a thought doesn't mean it's going to come true."

Why it helps: Helps children distinguish thoughts from facts without promising absolute certainty.

When your child becomes angry or lashes out

> "I can see something feels really difficult right now. It's okay to feel angry, but I can't let you hurt me or anyone else. I'm going to help us both stay safe, and we can talk when things feel less overwhelming."

Why it helps: Maintains boundaries while recognising that anger may be communicating distress.

When your child says, "I can't do it"

> "Right now, it feels impossible. I wonder whether anxiety is making it look bigger than it really is. We don't have to do everything at once. What's one small part we could try?"

Why it helps: Encourages manageable steps rather than pushing or rescuing.

When your child is frightened of being separated from you

> "I know being apart feels uncomfortable. We can miss each other and still manage being apart. Let's think about what would help you feel supported while you practise."

Why it helps: Communicates confidence in the child's developing capacity to tolerate separation.

When your child says, "Nobody likes me"

> "That sounds really lonely. I wonder what's happened that's left you feeling that way. I'd really like to understand."

Why it helps: Creates space for the child's experience instead of immediately contradicting their feelings.

When your child is avoiding something because of anxiety

> "I can understand why avoiding it feels easier. Anxiety often makes us want to move away from things that feel uncomfortable. But sometimes avoiding them makes the fear grow. Let's work out a small, manageable way forward together."

Why it helps: Explains the avoidance cycle without shaming the child. This should be adapted where there is a genuine safety concern or an unmet support need.

When your child has intrusive thoughts

> "Sometimes our minds produce thoughts that are frightening, upsetting or completely opposite to what we want. Having a thought doesn't mean you agree with it, want it or will act on it. You can tell me about it without being judged."

Why it helps: Reduces shame and encourages openness. For OCD-related intrusive thoughts, parents may also need guidance on avoiding repeated reassurance rituals.

When your child says, "My tummy hurts, I can't go"

> "I believe that your tummy hurts. Anxiety can sometimes make our bodies feel really uncomfortable. Let's understand what your body might be telling us and what support you need."

Why it helps: Validates physical symptoms rather than assuming they're invented. Persistent or concerning symptoms should also be medically assessed.

When your child is overwhelmed and crying

> "You don't have to explain anything right now. I'm here. We can sit together, and when you're ready, we can try to understand what's happened."

Why it helps: Prioritises connection and containment before problem-solving.

When your child is afraid of making mistakes

> "I wonder whether you're worried about getting it wrong. Sometimes it can feel safer not to try than to risk making a mistake. But making mistakes is part of learning, and you don't have to get everything right."

Why it helps: Challenges perfectionistic expectations without minimising the child's fears.

When your child wants you to fix everything

> "I know you'd really like me to make this feeling go away. And I wish I could. But I also know you're learning how to manage difficult feelings. I'll support you while you work through this."

Why it helps: Moves the parent from rescuing towards supporting the child's developing independence.

When your child says, "You don't understand!"

> "You're right that I might not fully understand what this feels like for you. But I want to. Can you help me understand what I'm missing?"

Why it helps: Reduces defensiveness and demonstrates genuine curiosity.

When your teenager shuts down

> "I've noticed you've been quieter than usual. I'm not going to push you to talk, but I do want you to know I'm interested in how things are for you. We can talk whenever you're ready."

Why it helps: Offers connection without demanding immediate emotional disclosure.

When your child has a setback

> "I know this feels disappointing, especially after how hard you've been trying. But one difficult day doesn't erase everything you've already managed. Let's think about what made today harder."

Why it helps: Encourages reflection rather than framing setbacks as failure.

When your child says, "I'm scared"

> "Thank you for telling me. Can you help me understand what feels frightening? We don't need to rush to get rid of the feeling. Let's see if we can understand it first."

Why it helps: Models curiosity about anxiety instead of immediately trying to remove it.

When your child is worried about your anxiety

> "You might have noticed that I worry sometimes too. That's something I'm working on, and it's my responsibility to manage my feelings. You don't need to look after my worries."

Why it helps: Reduces the risk of children feeling responsible for their parent's emotional wellbeing.

When you, the parent, have lost your patience

> "I'm sorry I raised my voice. I was feeling overwhelmed, and I didn't manage that very well. That wasn't your responsibility. I'm going to think about what I could do differently

next time."

Why it helps: Models repair, accountability and emotional reflection without placing blame on the child.

You need to remain willing to understand, reflect and repair.

These scripts are for everyday anxiety-related difficulties, not a substitute for individual assessment or crisis support. If your child is at immediate risk of harming themselves or someone else, prioritise safety and urgent professional help.