

# Helping Your Anxious Child



by JULIE LOWE

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Mason is a perceptive and emotional seven-year-old boy. He reads people well, and has a particular awareness of danger and uncomfortable situations. Mason recently heard about a school shooting. He asked his father if it is safe to go to school. He then asked his mother if he has to ride the bus. What if a mean person gets on the bus? What if that person has a gun? Despite their comforting words, he again asks, “But how do you *know* I’ll be safe?”

What can Mason’s parents say to him to reassure him? What should you say to *your* children to help them with their worries and fears? How can you help them to live at peace and find safety in a frightening world?

It’s not only your child who is experiencing anxiety; many families are seeing an increase in anxiety in their children. With mass media and a 24/7 news cycle, kids are exposed to the reality of global perils. News of war, terrorist attacks, wildfires, Internet hoaxes, and cyberbullying spread quickly. Children and adolescents are exposed more and more to frightening possibilities of calamity. And there are many sources of childhood fear and anxiety closer to home too: germs, the flu, getting bad grades, peer ridicule, giving oral reports in school, not fitting in, the possibility of losing a loved one. The list

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goes on. For kids who are prone to worry and anxiety, the exposure to this combination of threats can have a snowball effect.

Paul Foxman, in his book *The Worried Child*, asserts that anxiety is the number one epidemic in the United States and that approximately twenty-five percent of the population struggle with it.<sup>1</sup> Foxman describes how we often give children conflicting messages that the world is both safe and unsafe. Public schools have metal detectors and security guards. Airports have multiple security checks, pat-downs, and bomb-sniffing dogs. Though we continue to take more and more precautions, we regularly tell our children they are safe and not to worry. It's no wonder that many of them are struggling.

### **Some Kids Are More Anxious than Others**

Even though kids might be exposed to the same events and pressures, some will struggle with anxiety more than others. There can be several factors that contribute to this. As any parent, teacher, or counselor will tell you, every child is *wired differently*. They each have different strengths and weaknesses, and tendencies toward particular struggles or temptations.

Some children have an *innate temptation* to wrestle with fear. They are more alert to potential risks and are in tune with the peril others are experiencing. Their temperament creates a heightened sense of vulnerability.

Some kids have personalities that are more *perfectionistic*, which can lead them to have difficulty relaxing, to be driven by the desire to please, to be non-assertive, and to want to avoid conflict. Kids like this often struggle with fear of people, including fear of disappointing or failing, and may put high expectations on themselves. These tendencies lead to stress and anxiety.

Another cause of persistent anxiety in children is *prolonged exposure to stressful situations*. Traumatic events, turmoil in the family, or an unpredictable lifestyle can lead to a sense of endangerment and on-going anxiety.

As a parent, how do you know when a child's fear is within "normal" range, or when it is problematic and needs intervention? Start by evaluating

<sup>1</sup> Paul Foxman, *The Worried Child: Recognizing Anxiety in Children and Helping Them Heal* (Alameda, CA: Hunter House Publishers, 2004), 2.

what degree the child's anxiety impedes day-to-day life. How frequent is the fear/anxiety? How intense is it, on a scale of 1-10? How long does it last? Does it prevent your child from engaging in daily activities? Does it hinder him or her from taking healthy risks and engaging socially? Perhaps an over-arching question is: Is fear controlling them, or are they controlling their fear?

The more we understand the cause and intensity of a child's anxiety, the greater success we will have in shepherding him or her through it, and the wiser and more practical we will be in speaking into these experiences. The truth is, just like adults, children live in a fallen, broken world where bad

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things happen. Cancer, danger, crime, and trauma are real. We all fail, make mistakes, get made fun of, and experience bullying. Life does not always go the way we would like it to.

How are we to minister to our children given this reality? Unfortunately, the lure for us as adults is to try to comfort our kids and reassure them that their fears are unfounded and that bad things won't happen. Sometimes that is the case, but, most of the time, I find that children are afraid of dangers that are genuine. Will you give in to the temptation to give your children false comfort or assurances when you can't really deliver? Or will you help them to navigate life in a precarious, broken world? When it comes to managing fears and worries, your hope and theirs is not found in reassurances but in the One who reigns over all. It is *his* comfort and presence that will ultimately help. This means that many of us need to reevaluate how we respond when our kids need help with their fears.

### **Parental Comfort vs. God's Comfort**

When children are hurting, most parents agree they would do anything to help provide relief. At times, this means you might settle for solutions that

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