



Elementary

CRISIS

PARENT CONVERSATION GUIDE

... for great conversations with kids

When a kid experiences crisis, they tend to have more questions than answers. What they're going through might sound minor to you, or be really scary to both of you. Either way, be sensitive to any changes you see in your child, and be careful to respond by offering grace and support along the way.

During this phase, your child is building a worldview, so when dealing with a crisis, remember to reiterate what is true. Be honest when you don't have the answers, assure them you're there and they are loved by you—and remind them that God is there, too.

Validate their feelings. When you interact with your child, there are some things that you can say and do to help them feel validated and secure. Here are a few:

- "Some things are changing, and that can be tough. But there are some things that will never change. I love you. God loves you. And we can trust God no matter what."
- "This is what I'm feeling right now, how are you doing?"
- "Can you put words to what you are thinking or feeling? Even if it doesn't all make sense, talking about it can help."
- "Do you have any questions for me?"
- "This doesn't make sense to me either. I can understand how this is confusing for you."
- "I am here whenever you need me."
- "Sometimes, scary things happen in our world, but I want you to know that God is always with you. And you can talk to Him anytime."

Make sure to involve professionals, counselors (as needed), as well as your ministry leader.

ANXIETY

CONVERSATION GUIDE ... for parents of Elementary Schoolers

Whether it's bad weather, sleeping away from home, or test-taking, it's very common for elementary schoolers to experience varying levels of anxiety.

WHAT THEY'RE ANXIOUS ABOUT

Up until about eight years old, many causes of anxiety carry over from preschool—with a focus on specific, identifiable events like new situations, animals, the dark, loud noises, etc.

But as a child develops, the source of their anxiety becomes more abstract. As they grow more self-aware (beginning around second to third grade), their anxieties become more socially-influenced. They worry about friends, acceptance, the future, and new challenges at school.

Generally speaking, there are three types of fears kids this age experience¹: separation anxiety, social anxiety, and a specific phobia.

And just like adults, elementary-aged kids can experience the physical symptoms that come with anxiety. They can complain of stomachaches or headaches, a racing heart, or trouble sleeping.

TIPS TO HELP THEM NAVIGATE

When our kid's anxiety is heightened, it's common for us as parents to want to remove that discomfort. And while it's healthy for us to give our kids ways to cope, we shouldn't try to engineer a "worry-free" lifestyle for them. A moderate amount of stress and anxiety pushes kids to succeed at home and in school, as well as protects them from certain dangers.

So, how do you help your elementary schooler confront their fears and develop their own tools for managing anxiety?

1. **Give their anxiety a name.** Asking kids to name the source of their anxiety helps them to personalize and externalize their fears.

For younger elementary kids, ask:

Will you draw a picture of what's making them worried or upset?
Tell me about the picture. Is someone/something in the picture talking?
What are they/is it saying?

For older elementary kids, ask:

Will you name the worry floating around in your brain.
What is the worry telling you?
Is the worry telling you the truth?

2. **Practice exposure.** Avoiding potentially stressful situations may ease anxiety temporarily, but is not a long-term solution (not to mention unrealistic). Gradually exposing your kids to the sources of their fears and anxieties can rewire the brain to prove to a child that they can survive anxious moments. It can also teach a child that you are trustworthy, even when you push them to do things that initially make them nervous.

3. Give them tools to fight their fears on their own. The emotional center of the brain takes time to *slooooooow* down once it's agitated. There are a few tools that will help your kid calm down enough so the thinking center of the brain can come back online to logic through the distress. Remember, you won't always be around to walk your kid through their anxious moments. It's important to help them develop coping skills they can practice on their own!

Breathe: Practice deep-breathing with your kid. As breathing slows down, so do the thoughts racing around the brain. Read up on Belly Breathing and/or similar techniques.

Get active: Getting up and moving around can help work out anxious energy. (Outside whenever possible.)

Think happy thoughts: Teach your kid to redirect their thoughts by remembering something happy like a trip to the beach or a birthday party.

4. MAKE IT PERSONAL

Our kids are always watching us. They observe how we react in different situations—especially in situations where we're under a large amount of pressure and stress. It's important for you (as a parent *and* for your own well-being) to be intentional about caring for yourself when it comes to your own anxiety. Make sure you have someone you can open up to honestly about your own fears and concerns.

5. WIDEN THE CIRCLE

Only you know your kid, but if your child exhibits more serious behaviors, then it may be time to reach out a professional. Keep in mind that some children are more prone to anxiety than others. If your kid's anxiety is preventing them from having an overall happy life, if they're unable to leave the house or play with other children, consult with your pediatrician or a licensed counselor.

Seeking professional help isn't a sign of failure as a parent. It makes you a good parent when you realize your child sometimes needs more than you are able to give.

¹<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/anxiety-in-children-2018081414532>