



# Learning to Grow

MAKING A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER

## When Fear Turns into Anxiety

Many children are fearful in new situations. It's normal for them to be afraid of the dark, shy around new people, or nervous when arriving at unfamiliar places. Anxiety becomes a problem when it causes extreme distress or interferes with everyday activities.

Some common types of anxiety that young children experience include:

- ♥ *Separation Anxiety*- fear when separated from parent or caregiver
- ♥ *Specific Phobias*- irrational and extreme fear of situations or things (e.g., insects, thunderstorms)
- ♥ *Social Anxiety*- strong fear of social situations (e.g., going to a birthday party)

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, we are experiencing a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health. When anxiety begins in the early years, it often continues into adolescence and adulthood, increasing the risk of truancy, substance abuse, and depression. The good news is that by noticing if your child struggles with anxiety, you can talk to your pediatrician who can provide resources or connect you with a specialist. Learning coping strategies when she is young can help build your child's confidence and break the cycle of anxiety.

This newsletter will present information that will help you support the anxious child and suggest coping activities for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.



### This newsletter includes:

- ♥ **Age-specific information and suggestions** about activities to do with your infant, toddler, or preschooler,
- ♥ **Featured activities** for each age group,
- ♥ **How This Helps:** a summary of your child's development by doing these activities together,
- ♥ **Resources:** for more information about this topic, and
- ♥ **Suggested Books:** a list of books to read with your child.

# Infants

By around 6-8 months of age, anxiety around strangers may begin. Your previously easy-going infant may now become tense and fearful when strangers come too close. She may even display fear when close friends and relatives approach her too abruptly. This reaction is completely normal for your infant as she reaches the stage of object permanence, knowing that you exist, even if she cannot see you.

Hearing your baby cry out for you as you drop her off at a day care or a relative's house can be difficult, tempting you to go back to reassure her; however, this will only make it worse the next time you leave. Here are some suggestions from parenting experts:

- ♥ **Peek-a-boo.** Play peek-a-boo to show your baby that even if you disappear, you will always return. Play a longer game of peek-a-boo by pretending that a stuffed animal or doll is going on a trip but will return after a short time.
- ♥ **Practice.** Help her to cope with separation by allowing her to crawl into another room that has been babyproofed. Wait for one or two minutes before following her (use a baby monitor if you have one for supervision).
- ♥ **Communicate.** When you leave her to go to



another room, tell her where you're going and that you'll come back. If she fusses, talk to her instead of immediately returning. Eventually she'll learn that you always come back when you say you will.

- ♥ **Remain Calm.** Children sense our anxiety, so if you are tense and anxious about leaving her, it will heighten her anxiety. Try some deep breathing to calm your nerves.
- ♥ **Always Say Goodbye.** Although it is tempting to sneak away when your baby is involved in something, it is important to always say goodbye so she can trust that you will not disappear suddenly. It is important for her to know that when you leave, you always come back.

## Activity for Infants: *Goodbye Ritual*

What You Need:  
None

What to Do:

1. Create a good-bye ritual to ease the separation and provide a sense of comfort and security. You can make up your own special ritual or choose from one of the ideas below. Just make sure to do it in the same way each time.
  - Sing a good-bye song or rhyme together.
  - Give your baby a hug, a kiss on each cheek, and wave.
  - Blow raspberries on your baby's tummy.



*(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps her development and school readiness.)*

# Toddlers

Toddlers may startle at loud noises such as vacuums, thunderstorms, or fireworks. These sudden or loud sounds overwhelm their immature nervous system causing them to startle. Your toddler may then associate those unpleasant sensations with a certain object or place and start to get scared as soon as you bring out the vacuum or when the lights go out, as it may have before a thunderstorm.

You may help to ease your child's fears by:

- ♥ **Naming the feeling.** Teach emotional literacy by giving the feeling a name. For example, "You are scared of the loud noise."
- ♥ **Giving a Heads Up.** Let your child know when the feared noise (e.g., vacuum) is about to begin, using a calm voice. For example, "The vacuum is going to make a noise now. It will clean the carpet and then it stops."
- ♥ **Exposing and reassuring her.** Avoiding situations that might cause anxiety will only help to ease it temporarily. Help your toddler slowly face her fears by encouraging and supporting her. Reassure her that she is safe by saying, "It's okay. I know you are scared. The loud noise is the vacuum cleaner. You're safe."
- ♥ **Using mindful breathing.** Teach your child to practice deep breathing before the fearful event. These breathing techniques help to calm her nervous system, reducing anxiety



## Activity for Toddlers: *Flower and Candle Breathing*

When your child is in a calm state, teach her the Flower and Candle deep breathing technique.

What You Need:

None

What to Do:

1. **Flower Breath:** Have your child hold her pointer finger up and imagine smelling a flower, breathing in through her nose.
2. **Blow Out the Candle Breath:** Have her raise her finger to her mouth and pretend to slowly blow out the candle



*(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps her development and school readiness.)*



## Preschoolers

During this stage in your child's development, she may be showing more interest in interacting with others and developing friendships. However, some preschoolers are slow to warm up and anxious around others. If her anxiety around others interferes with her normal activities or behavior, she may need some extra support to learn to cope with her feelings. For example, if she tends to have a difficult time with separation, or often complains of headaches or stomach aches when going to a social event, then anxiety may be of concern. Here are some strategies that may help alleviate anxiety:

- ♥ **Personalize and externalize.** Ask your child to give anxiety a name. For example, "I can see Wally Worry being a bully and taking over you right now. Let's tell Wally to stop being a bully." Giving anxiety a name can help her identify her fears and learn to be the boss of it.
- ♥ **Prepare and gradually ease in.** Gradual exposure helps to rewire an anxious brain. Prepare for anxiety provoking situations ahead of time by talking about what to expect and touring new places ahead of time. For example, if your child is anxious about attending day care, visit the program with her for an hour.



When she begins attending, start with just a short amount of time (one hour) and gradually increase the amount of time that she attends while assuring her that she will be picked up at a specified time (e.g., after nap).

- ♥ **Model confidence.** Children will sense if caregivers are anxious. Try to be mindful of what you model through words and body language. Mindfulness techniques can help to temper overanxious reactions.

### Activity for Preschoolers: *My Worry Monster*

#### What You Need:

- Paper
- Colored pencils or crayons
- \*Optional- googly eyes, feather, or other collage materials

#### What to Do:

1. Talk to your child about what things makes her scared or worried.
2. Tell her that this fear is caused by an invisible worry. This invisible worry monster needs a name, and since each worry is different, each worry monster will look different and have a unique name.
3. Give your child paper and materials to draw her worry monster. Write the name of the worry monster on the paper and refer to it when she is experiencing this emotion.



*(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps her development and school readiness.)*

## How This Helps

The activities suggested in this newsletter help promote many different aspects of development:

### Physical Development

- ♥ Use and strengthen large muscles such as neck, arms, and legs
- ♥ Learn to use her senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching

### Social and Emotional Development

- ♥ Learn to cooperate with others
- ♥ Feel important and good about herself

### Language and Literacy Development

- ♥ Increase her observation, listening, and understanding skills, and attention span
- ♥ Build verbal skills and vocabulary

### Cognitive Development

- ♥ Recognize math concepts like numbers, sizes, shapes, sequences, volume, measurement, and time
- ♥ Develop her creativity and imagination



## Kids in the Kitchen

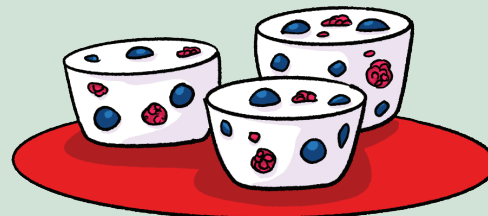
Cooking teaches valuable lessons such as math (quantities, measurement), science (how matter changes), fine motor (stirring, pouring), and literacy (print awareness). As you make this recipe with your child, talk about kitchen safety. Show her how to handle items safely and allow her to do as much as she is capable of. Praise her efforts, and ask questions throughout the process to encourage her thinking skills. Most of all, have fun!

### Fourth of July Froyo

*Adapted from <https://tasty.co/recipe/froyo-fruit-cups>*

Ingredients:

- blueberry
- raspberry
- 1 ½ cups vanilla Greek yogurt



Directions:

1. Have your keiki count 12 cupcake liners as she places them in a muffin tin.
2. Using a spoon, dollop two tablespoons of yogurt into the bottom of each liner.
3. Allow your keiki to top the yogurt with blueberries and raspberries.
4. Freeze for at least two hours.
5. Remove cupcake liners before serving.

## Resources

### ***UCLA Child Anxiety Resilience Education and Support (CARES)***

<https://carescenter.ucla.edu/>

This website brings proven strategies from anxiety experts with talks, trainings, and educational tip sheets.

### ***Relax and Be Happy: 5 Mindfulness Tools to Reduce Anxiety Now***

<https://home.edweb.net/webinar/classroommanagement20210331/>

Watch this fun-filled recorded webinar and learn new mindfulness tools that capture imaginations and help create resilient, happy children in this 1.0-hour webinar.



## Suggested Books

Discover these books and more at the **Hawai'i State Public Library** [www.librarieshawaii.org](http://www.librarieshawaii.org).

### **Infants and Toddlers**

#### ***Doggie Gets Scared* by Leslie Patricelli**

Young children are sure to love this charming book about Doggie's fears of shadows, strangers, thunder, and lightning! Don't worry Doggie, Baby is here! Great book for exploring a child's fears and ways to feel better.

#### ***Mindfulness Moments for Kids: Breathe Like a Bear* by Kira Willey**

This board book is filled with mindful moments and exercises for young children with easy-to-follow breathing exercise for managing their bodies, breath, and emotions.

### **Preschoolers**

#### ***Lots of Feelings* by Shelley Rotner**

Simple text and photographs introduce basic emotions--happy, grumpy, thoughtful, and more--and how people express them.

#### ***Ruby Finds a Worry* by Tom Percival**

A little girl named Ruby finds something unexpected: a Worry. Every day, the Worry grows a little bigger until eventually, the Worry is ENORMOUS and is all she can think about. This story helps teach children about emotions and anxieties.



**Learning to Grow** is a project of the University of Hawai'i, Windward Community College, with funding from the Hawai'i Department of Human Services. Visit our website at [www.learningtogrowhawaii.org](http://www.learningtogrowhawaii.org) or visit us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/learningtogrowhawaii](https://www.facebook.com/learningtogrowhawaii)