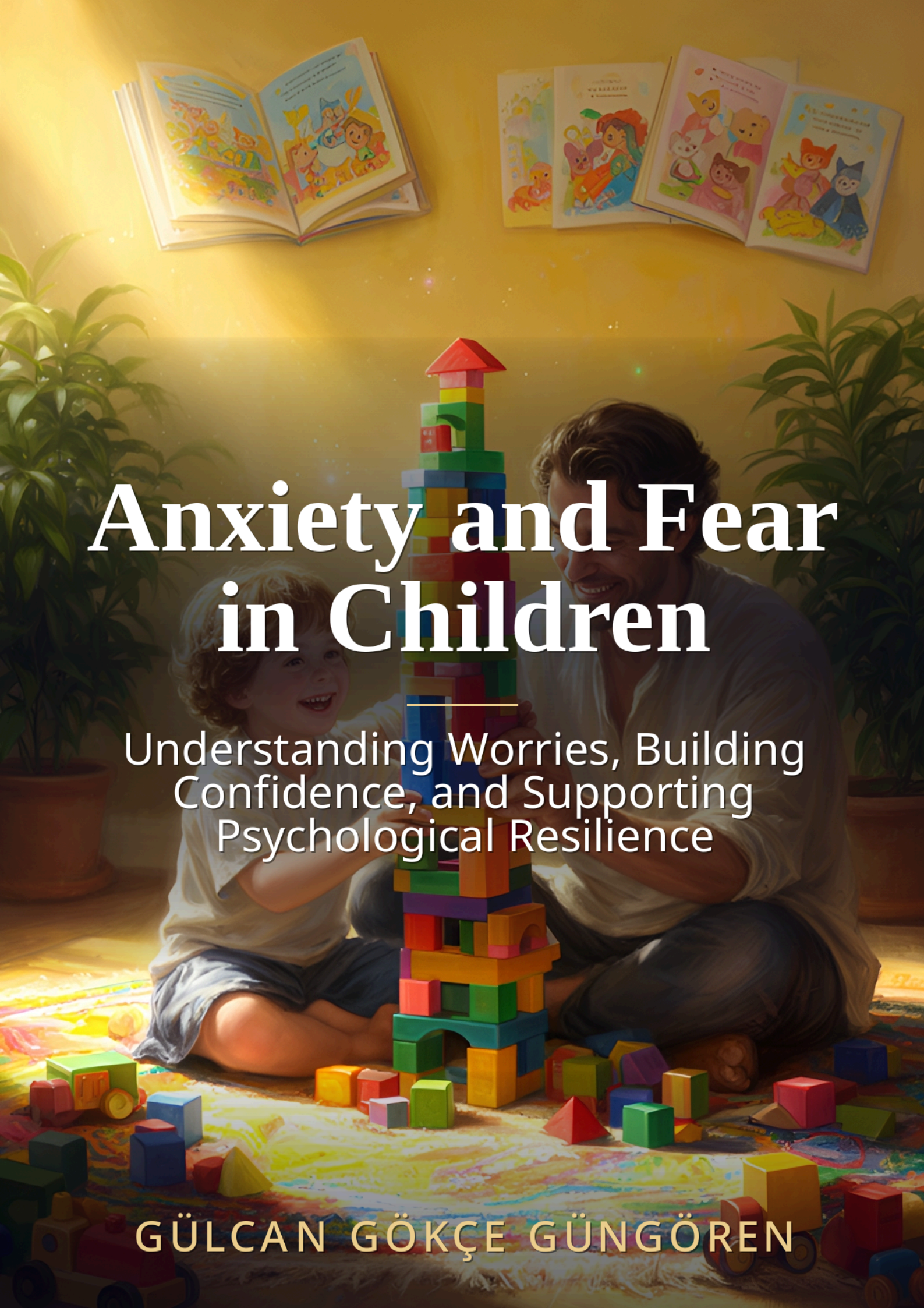




Anxiety and Fear in Children

Understanding Worries, Building
Confidence, and Supporting
Psychological Resilience

GÜLCAN GÖKÇE GÜNGÖREN

Anxiety and Fear in Children: Understanding Worries, Building Confidence, and Supporting Psychological Resilience

*Endişeleri Anlamak, Güven Duygusunu Geliştirmek ve Psikolojik
Dayanıklılığı Desteklemek*

Gülcan GÖKÇE GÜNGÖREN

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An Overview of Fear and Anxiety in Childhood

Has your child ever clung to your leg at the doorway of a birthday party, refused to go upstairs alone once the lights were off, or cried at the school gate as if something terrible were happening — and you stood there wondering whether this was normal or whether something was wrong?

You are not the first parent to stand in that doorway with that question. And the honest answer is that it can be both, depending on how often it happens, how intense it gets, and whether it shrinks your child's world or just brushes against it. That is what this chapter is about: learning to tell the difference.

The same feeling wearing different clothes

Fear and anxiety in childhood rarely announce themselves with a label. They show up as behaviour. A child who suddenly cannot sleep alone at eight years old, having slept fine at six. A child who develops a stomach ache every Sunday evening. A child who asks the same question — *will you be there when I wake up?* — five times before you leave the room. A child who goes quiet at the edge of a group of children rather than joining in, watching from a safe distance.

Suppose a family is getting ready for the first day of school. One child is excited, chatty, laying out clothes the night before. Another is irritable, complains of a headache, and by the gate dissolves into tears. Same event, same family, same preparation — completely different responses. Neither child is being difficult. Both are having a feeling; only one of them has a feeling their body can carry comfortably.

It helps to notice that fear and anxiety, in everyday language, get used up almost interchangeably, but they are not quite the same experience. Fear tends to have a target — the dark staircase, the large dog, the loud noise. Anxiety is more like a background hum: a worry about something that has not happened yet, sometimes without a clear picture of what it is. A child can often tell you what they are afraid of. Anxiety is harder for them to put into words, which is exactly why it so often comes out as a behaviour instead — the tears, the clinging, the refusal, the endless questions.

What is happening underneath

Underneath all of it, something quite simple and quite sensible is going on. A child's brain is built to keep them safe, and it takes a long time to finish the job. The part that sounds the

alarm — the fast, automatic, body-first part — is working from very early on. The part that can reason, weigh up evidence, and say to itself *I've done this before and it was fine* is much slower to mature. So when a child meets something unfamiliar or uncertain, the alarm goes off first and the explanation arrives late, if at all.

This is why you cannot usually reason a frightened child out of being frightened in the moment. You can explain, calmly and correctly, that there are no monsters under the bed — and your child can believe you completely and still be unable to stay in the room alone. The alarm is not waiting for the explanation. This is not stubbornness or a failure to listen. It is the order in which the system works.

Then there is the repetition, which puzzles many parents. Why does the same fear come back night after night, even after a good day? Because the alarm learns from experience, and one calm night is one data point. Each time your child avoids the thing they fear, they get relief — and relief is a powerful teacher. The brain registers: *that felt better, do that again*. So avoidance quietly grows, and with it the sense that the feared thing really must be dangerous, otherwise why would we work so hard to stay away from it?

This is the loop worth understanding early, because it runs underneath almost every worry this book will look at — the dark, separation, school, other children, making mistakes. The feeling is real, the body responds, the child avoids, the avoidance brings relief, the relief confirms the danger, and the next time the alarm is a little quicker to sound. Nothing here is broken. It is a protective system doing its job a little too enthusiastically, and part of our work as adults is to help it calibrate.

One small step you can take today

Here is something you can do before the day is over, and it costs nothing. Pick one fear your child has — not the biggest one, not the one that worries you most, just a mild, everyday one. The dark hallway they won't cross alone. The neighbour they hide behind you to avoid greeting. The coat they refuse to put on without a fight on Sunday night.

Then get curious about it out loud, without trying to fix it. Something like: *"I've noticed you don't like going past the stairs when the lights are off. What's the worst part — the dark itself, or not knowing what's there?"* And then stop talking. Let the answer be strange. Let it be "the wall looks different." Let it be "I don't know." The point is not the answer. The point is that you are asking, calmly, without alarm in your voice, which quietly tells your child that this topic is safe to talk about.

Why this and not something bigger? Because the single most useful thing you can build in the early days is a shared language for the fear. A child who can say *"I'm scared of the stairs"* is a child who no longer has to express it only through tears or refusal. You are not solving anything yet. You are opening a door.

Keep it going by making it a habit rather than an event. A few quiet questions in the car, at bath time, on the walk to school. Notice, name, ask, listen — and then let it go. Don't circle back to it five times a day. If you ask about the fear every ten minutes, you accidentally teach your child that the fear is a very big deal. Ask once, listen well, and carry on with the day.

Where people usually stumble

The first stumble is expecting the conversation to change things immediately. You have a lovely, calm talk about the dark staircase, your child seems to understand, and then that night they are standing at the top of the stairs crying again. It is easy to read that as failure — either the talk didn't work or your child wasn't really listening. Neither is true.

Understanding something in daylight and feeling safe about it in the dark are two different jobs, done by two different parts of the brain, on two different timetables.

The second stumble is the rescue reflex. When your child is upset, every instinct says *make it stop now* — carry them past the stairs, let them skip the party, promise them you'll never be late. And in the moment, that works. The crying stops. What you may not see is that the relief your child feels is also confirmation that the stairs really were dangerous, the party really was a threat. You are not doing anything wrong by comforting your child; that part is essential. The stumble is only when comfort becomes permanent avoidance, when the rescue is repeated every single time so the fear never gets a chance to shrink on its own.

When you notice yourself stumbling, the way back is small and gentle. Say to yourself: *one step, not zero, not ten*. Suppose your child refuses the dark hallway. Perhaps tonight they stand at the edge of it with you, holding your hand, for ten seconds. That is the step. Not walking through alone, not calling the whole thing off. Something small enough that your child can actually do it, and big enough that they notice they did it. Then say the true thing out loud: *"You stood there and you were scared and you did it anyway."* That sentence is worth more than an hour of reassurance.

As for how long this takes — honestly, longer than any of us would like. You are working against a habit built over months or years, and you are working with a nervous system that is still under construction. Expect progress to look like a bumpy line rather than a straight one: two good nights, then a bad one, then three good ones. A child who was clinging last

week may still cling next week, and then one day do the thing without comment, as if it were never a problem. Small, repeated, low-pressure steps over weeks and months is the realistic picture. Anyone promising a quick fix is selling something.

A short summary

Fear and anxiety in childhood are normal visitors. They arrive as behaviour more often than as words, they run on a protective system that sounds the alarm before it can reason, and they grow through avoidance and shrink through small, repeated, supported exposure. Your job is not to eliminate fear — a child with no fear at all would not be safe — but to help it calibrate, one modest step at a time, with your calm presence as the steady ground they step from.

PRACTICE

1. Choose one mild, everyday fear your child has — not the biggest one.
2. Ask about it once today, out loud, with curiosity and no fixing: "What's the worst part?"
3. Listen without correcting, then let the topic go until the next natural moment.
4. Before the day ends, name one small step your child could take toward that fear this week — small enough to be doable.
5. When they take it, say the true sentence out loud: "You were scared and you did it anyway."

Fears by Developmental Stage

Have you ever noticed that the very same dark hallway that your child walked down without a second thought at four suddenly becomes an impossible journey at seven? Or that a child who happily waved you off at the nursery door last year now clings to your leg at the school gate as if you were about to disappear forever?

Most parents experience some version of this and quietly wonder whether something has gone wrong. It hasn't. What you are seeing is one of the most ordinary and least discussed facts of childhood: fear changes shape as children grow. The monster under the bed at five is not the same fear as the fear of being left out at ten, and neither of them resembles the quiet dread of failing an exam at fourteen. The trigger is different, the texture is different, and — importantly — what helps is different too. Understanding that pattern takes a lot of the panic out of the moment.

The Same Child, a Different Fear

Parents often describe this shift as if their child has regressed. Suppose that a five-year-old who used to sleep through the night begins calling out from the bedroom door again, or a child who chatted easily with neighbours at six goes silent when a visitor arrives at eight. Nothing has gone backwards. What has happened is that the child's mind has grown, and a more developed mind can imagine more. It can picture consequences it could not picture before. It can hold onto a worry and carry it from one day into the next. A toddler lives almost entirely in the present moment, so a fear passes the instant its cause leaves the room. An older child can keep the fear alive long after the event, which is why the same worry seems to follow them around.

This is why age matters so much when you are trying to make sense of a fear. The same behaviour at two and at twelve can mean two completely different things. A two-year-old crying when you leave is not being manipulative; separation is genuinely frightening because they have not yet grasped that you still exist when you are out of sight. A twelve-year-old who does not want to go to a sleepover is working with a very different set of thoughts — about belonging, about what others will think, about being the odd one out. If you respond to both with the same words, one of them will feel misunderstood.

From Infancy to the Teenage Years

In the earliest months, fear is mostly about sudden change — a loud noise, a sharp movement, the loss of a familiar face. Babies are not yet frightened of the dark or of

strangers in any lasting way, because they cannot hold onto an idea long enough to be frightened by it. What soothes a baby is simple and physical: closeness, warmth, a steady voice. There is nothing to explain and nothing to reason with. The message being delivered is not words but a feeling — that the world can be made calm again, and that someone will do the making.

As children move through toddlerhood and the preschool years, two new fears tend to appear: strangers and separation. Both come from the same root. The child has formed a strong attachment to the people who care for them, and that attachment now makes unfamiliar faces feel like a threat. This is the age of the leg-clinging, the tearful goodbye at the nursery door, the sudden refusal to speak to a grandparent they have met many times. It can be baffling, because it looks like a step backwards. In reality it is evidence of connection — the child has learned to love someone specific, and that love makes losing them feel possible and terrible. What helps here is not argument but ritual: a goodbye that is short, warm, and the same every time, so that the child learns the leaving is followed by the return.

By the early school years, imagination takes over. This is the golden age of monsters, shadows, and things under the bed. A child's mind is now rich enough to invent what might be hiding in the dark, but not yet steady enough to dismiss it. The dark stops being nothing and starts being full of potential. Alongside this comes a new and very human fear: fear of failure. School brings comparison, marks, and the awful discovery that some things are hard and that other people notice when you struggle. In *The gift of failure*, Jessica Lahey (2015) points out that children learn resilience by being allowed to struggle and fail with support, rather than by being protected from difficulty — a reminder that some of the anxiety you see in this stage is not a problem to remove but a muscle to build.

Later childhood and the approach to adolescence shift the ground again. Fears become more social and more internal. Being laughed at, being excluded, being different, being bad at something in front of others — these take priority over ghosts. The child is now watching themselves from the outside, imagining how they appear, and the imagined judgement of others can feel far more frightening than any dark room. Alongside this come worries about the future: tests, performance, the sense that the stakes are rising. What helped at five — a nightlight, a quick check under the bed — is no longer what is needed. Now the child needs to be heard, taken seriously, and helped to test their own fears against reality.

What Is Actually Happening Underneath

So why does the same child seem to develop new fears at almost every stage? Part of the answer is that fear is not a flaw in the brain; it is a protective system doing its job. The problem is that the system is calibrated by experience, and a child's experience is limited. Their mind is doing exactly what it should — scanning for danger — but with incomplete information. A shadow at night could be anything, because the child has not yet accumulated enough ordinary nights to know that shadows are usually nothing. A new classroom could go any number of ways, because the child has not yet learned that new places almost always settle.

The other part of the answer is that fears repeat because they are learned and reinforced, not because the child is weak. When a child feels afraid and then avoids the thing — the dark, the party, the new class — the fear lifts sharply, and that lift is a reward. The brain remembers: *avoiding worked*. So the same pattern returns next time, and the time after, each round making the world feel slightly smaller. This is why a fear that seems small at first can quietly grow into something that organises the whole family's week. It is not that the child is choosing to be difficult. It is that their alarm system has been taught, very gently and very logically, that retreat brings relief.

The good news tucked inside this explanation is that the same mechanism can run in the other direction. If avoidance teaches fear, then supported exposure — small, steady, non-forced steps towards the thing that frightens them — teaches the body something else: that the alarm was wrong, or at least survivable. Not overnight, and not by pushing a frightened child into the dark and closing the door. Slowly, with company, with words, with a little at a time. The fear will not vanish at every stage, and it is not supposed to. What matters is that the child learns, stage by stage, that they can meet something frightening and come out the other side still themselves.

child is unlucky. A fear that is met with comfort and then avoided teaches the child that the fear was worth avoiding. A fear that is met with calm presence and a gentle look at reality teaches something quieter — that fear can be felt and survived. Each stage gives you a new chance to teach that lesson, which is why the work is never really finished, only repeated in a new shape.

One Small Step You Can Take Today

Pick the fear your child is showing right now and resist the urge to solve it all at once. Instead, make a single, small move: name the fear out loud, calmly, without trying to argue it away. Something as plain as "I think the dark feels scary to you right now" is enough. It tells the child that you have noticed, that it is allowed to be said, and that they are not alone in it. You are not agreeing that the danger is real. You are agreeing that the feeling is.

Then pair that naming with one concrete, low-stakes action. If the fear is the dark, sit together in the dim room for two minutes before lights out and talk about something ordinary. If it is school, walk the route or visit the gate on a quiet day. If it is new people, stay nearby for the first few minutes of a visit rather than pushing the child to go first. The action should be small enough that the child can do it without much distress — the point is not to prove the fear wrong in one dramatic moment, but to give the child a string of ordinary experiences in which nothing bad happened.

Keeping it going matters more than getting it right on any given day. Repeat the same small step regularly, at the same time, in the same way, so it becomes predictable. Predictability is what slowly convinces a worried mind that this situation is known and survivable. Notice and gently mention the moments that went fine — not with big praise, which can feel like pressure, but with a quiet observation: "That was okay, wasn't it." Over weeks, those small observations pile up into something your child can draw on.

Where People Usually Stumble

The most common stumble is going too fast because it hurts to watch your child struggle. You say you will sit outside the door for two minutes, and then the crying starts and you go back in, and now the fear has been taught that if it escalates, the avoidance wins. This is not a failure of love; it is love making the hard thing harder. The fix is not to be tougher but to go smaller. If two minutes is too much, make it one. If the school gate is too much, start at the corner. Shrink the step until your child can manage it, then hold that step steady.

Another stumble is treating a new stage of fear as a return to an old one. Parents plan for the monster under the bed and are blindsided by the fear of being left out at ten. It helps to remember that the age tells you what kind of fear to expect: body-level fears early, imagination through the early school years, social and future fears later. When a fear appears, ask yourself what stage your child is in and let that guide you rather than reaching for last year's solution.

A third stumble is talking too much. When a child is frightened, a long explanation sounds like proof that the fear is serious enough to require a long explanation. Short, warm, repeated words do more than a careful argument. You can reason with a calm child, but a frightened one mostly needs your steadiness first.

As for how long change takes: there is no honest timetable. Some fears fade in weeks once the small steps begin; others loosen and tighten over months, often flaring when something else in the child's life shifts — a new class, a move, a change at home. What you are looking for is not the disappearance of fear but a slow widening of what the child can do

while feeling it. Small, sustainable steps taken consistently will do more than any sudden push.

A Short Closing Summary

Fear changes shape as children grow, and that is normal, not a sign that something has gone wrong. The fears of infancy are about sudden change; toddlerhood brings strangers and separation; the early school years bring imagination and the first taste of failure; later childhood turns toward being judged and being left out. Underneath all of it, the same protective system is doing its job with limited experience, and the same lesson is being taught again and again: that fear can be felt and survived. Name the fear, take one small step, keep it steady, and let the ordinary good moments accumulate. That is enough to begin.

PRACTICE

- Name your child's current fear out loud in one calm sentence.
- Choose one small action your child can do with only mild distress, and repeat it at the same time each day.
- When the fear spikes, shrink the step rather than abandoning it.
- Quietly notice the moments that went fine, and say so simply.

Separation Anxiety: Moving Away from Parents

The Morning Goodbye That Hurts

Have you ever stood at a classroom door while your child's fingers tightened around yours, their face crumpling, and thought: we did this yesterday, why does it feel like the first day all over again? The bell has rung, other children are filing in, and you are caught between wanting to comfort and needing to leave. It is one of the most ordinary heartbreaks of parenting, and it can make you doubt everything — your child's confidence, your own choices, even whether mornings will ever get easier.

This experience wears many faces. For one child it is tears at the school gate that stop the moment you are out of sight. For another it is a stomach ache every Sunday evening, a quiet dread that builds before the week begins. Some children cling at birthday parties, refusing to let you step into the next room. Others seem fine all day and then fall apart the moment you return, as if the holding-together has finally been allowed to loosen. There is the child who cannot fall asleep without checking that you are still in the house, and the child who follows you from room to room as though distance itself were dangerous. These are different children, different families, different mornings — yet something in all of them is the same.

That sameness can be hard to name. The usual guesses travel quickly: they are spoiled, they are stubborn, they are going through a phase. But none of these labels help much when you are standing in the hallway at eight in the morning with a crying child attached to your leg. What helps instead is understanding what that child is actually telling you — because the behavior is not the problem. It is the child's way of managing something big with very small tools.

What's Happening Underneath

Here is the plain truth: a young child who cries when you leave is not being manipulative. They are experiencing a genuine sense of danger, even though no danger exists. To the child, your presence is the anchor that keeps the world steady, and your absence briefly makes the world feel unsteady. The tears, the clinging, the pleading — all of it is the body's alarm system doing its job, just with the volume turned too high.

Young children have a limited toolbox for handling that alarm. They can't yet reason their way through it, because the part of the brain that handles reasoning is still years away from being finished. What they can do is react — with their bodies, their voices, and their

closeness to you. This is why the reaction looks so dramatic. It isn't a performance; it's the only channel available to them. When your child clings, they are not making a choice to disobey — they are doing the only thing that feels safe.

Understanding this changes how you respond, but it also helps you see why the pattern repeats. The goodbye is short and intense, and it is followed by relief — the child settles, the day goes on, and then the next morning the same alarm goes off again. That loop is not a sign that nothing is working. It is simply how a worry behaves when it hasn't yet learned that the fear, once met, turns out to be survivable. Each goodbye is a small rehearsal, and rehearsals take repetition before they feel normal.

There is a supportive frame for this. Writing on children's emotional development, Jeanne Ellis Ormrod (*Essentials of Educational Psychology*, 2006) points out that children's understanding of separation and permanence develops gradually, which is why a goodbye can feel to a small child like a small loss every time. That is worth holding onto: the intensity you witness is developmentally normal, not a verdict on your child or your parenting.

What you are looking at, beneath the tears, is a child learning to hold two things in mind at once: "I am safe with you" and "I am safe without you." Learning to hold both is what the coming mornings are for — and it begins with the goodbye itself.

One Small Step You Can Take Today

Pick the goodbye itself. Not the whole morning, not the school system, not your child's temperament — just the goodbye. Choose one small, repeatable shape for it and do the same thing every time. For example: a hug at the door, one sentence ("I'll be back after lunch"), and out. Or: hand your child to the teacher, say the same words, leave. The content matters less than the sameness. A goodbye that looks identical every morning becomes predictable, and predictable is what a worried body is asking for.

Suppose that tomorrow you try this. You kneel down, hold your child's hands, say the same four or five words you will say every day this week, and then you go — not lingering at the door, not turning back for one more wave. The first time may go badly. That is not failure; it is information. What you are doing is teaching a small child that goodbyes have a shape, that the shape always finishes, and that you always come back. None of that can be taught in a single morning. It is taught across many.

To keep it going, choose one thing to keep steady and forgive yourself the rest. Often the steadiness of the adult is what a child borrows — if you approach the goodbye as a small,

normal ritual rather than an emergency, your child reads that. This does not mean hiding your feelings; it means not letting them become an extra alarm on top of the child's alarm. It also helps to be specific when you return: not "I missed you!" but "I came back after lunch, just like I said." Over time, the promise and the return start to line up, and the lining-up is what builds trust.

Where People Usually Stumble

The most common stumble is sneaking away. It feels kinder — no tears, no scene — but it teaches the child that you can vanish without warning, which makes them watch you more closely, not less. The child who has been left quietly becomes the child who never lets you out of sight. The alternative is harder in the moment and softer in the long run: say goodbye out loud, every time, even if it hurts.

Another stumble is the long goodbye. One more hug, one more question, one more reassurance — each feels loving, but together they teach the child that leaving is a big, dangerous event that deserves negotiation. Keep the goodbye short. The comfort does not need to be long to be real. If your child is crying when you leave, that is allowed; tears during a goodbye are not evidence that the goodbye was wrong.

And when it goes backward — a good week followed by a terrible morning — the usual reaction is to conclude that nothing works. In practice, wobbles after progress are normal. The worry has simply found a new moment to speak. Respond the same way you did before, without commentary about the regression, and you quietly close the loop. Realistic change here is slow: think in weeks, not days. Some children settle within a couple of weeks of consistent goodbyes; for others it takes much longer, and both are within the ordinary range. Judge progress by whether the mornings are trending toward easier over a month, not by any single morning.

A Short Closing Summary

Separation anxiety is not manipulation and not a verdict on your parenting. It is a young child's alarm system doing its job with tools that are still being built. The goodbye is where the learning happens, so make it short, warm, and the same every time. Say goodbye out loud rather than slipping away, keep it brief rather than drawn out, and expect wobbles rather than perfection. What you are building is not a child who never minds leaving you — it is a child who learns that leaving is survivable and that returning is reliable.

PRACTICE

- Choose one fixed goodbye ritual — same words, same place, same length — and use it every morning this week.
- Say the goodbye out loud and then leave; do not slip out quietly and do not return for extra waves.
- When you come back, name it specifically: "I came back after lunch, like I said."
- Track the mornings by the month, not the day; expect ups and downs and repeat the ritual through them.

Social Anxiety and Shyness

Have you ever watched a child go completely quiet the moment a room fills with people? Perhaps it was your own child at a birthday party, standing at the edge with a plate of cake, answering every question with a nod. Maybe it was at the school gate, where a cheerful "Good morning!" from another parent produced nothing but a face pressed into your coat. If you have seen this, you have probably also wondered: is this normal? Is my child okay? Should I be doing something right now, and if so, what?

Those are not small questions, and they deserve better than a quick reassurance. Shyness and social anxiety can look almost identical from the outside, and they show up in everyday shapes that most parents will recognise. A child who rehearses a question for the teacher and then cannot get the words out. A child who wants to join the football game but circles it for twenty minutes instead. A child who is chatty and loud at home and almost silent the moment a relative visits. A child who agrees with everything a friend suggests, because disagreeing feels too risky. None of these are dramatic. That is exactly why they are easy to miss, or to file away under "that's just her personality."

It helps to slow down and look at what these moments have in common. In almost every one of them, the child is running a quick, silent calculation: what will the people here think of me, and can I survive it if the answer is bad? The shy child and the socially anxious child are both asking that question. The difference is mostly in how loud the question is and how much it costs to answer it. For some children it is a mild background hum that fades once they warm up. For others it is so loud that it stops them from trying at all.

What Is Actually Happening Underneath

Here is the plain version. Social situations are full of things a child cannot control: new faces, unclear rules, the possibility of being looked at. For a child whose brain treats uncertainty as a threat, that combination sets off the same alarm system that fires when something is physically dangerous. The body responds first — tight stomach, hot face, faster heartbeat, the urge to shrink or leave. The thinking catches up a moment later and supplies a story: they will laugh at me, I will say something stupid, nobody here wants to talk to me.

The tricky part is that this alarm is not a sign that something is wrong with your child. It is a normal system doing an overenthusiastic job. In *Overcoming Anxiety for Dummies*, Charles H. Elliott describes anxiety as a kind of false alarm — the body's danger response switching on when no real danger is present. That framing is useful for parents, because it

moves the question from "what is broken?" to "how do we help the alarm settle down?" A child who understands that their body is sounding a warning that does not match the situation is already less frightened of their own reactions.

Now for why it repeats. When a child avoids the scary thing, the alarm switches off immediately, and that relief is a powerful reward. The brain quietly learns: leaving worked, so leaving is the answer. Next time, the alarm starts a little earlier and pushes a little harder, because the child has less and less evidence that the situation was survivable. This is why a child who was mildly shy last year can seem more withdrawn this year — not because something new went wrong, but because avoidance has been quietly practising.

There is a second loop that runs alongside this one, and it is easy to overlook. Children who feel anxious in social settings often become very careful observers of other people. They watch faces for signs of boredom or disapproval, and because they are already expecting a negative reaction, they find it everywhere — in a distracted glance, in a friend who is simply tired. Their attention is so turned inward, monitoring how they are coming across, that they have very little left over for the actual conversation. Then, afterwards, they replay it and conclude they were awkward. The conclusion feels like evidence, but it was produced by the very anxiety it seems to confirm.

All of this matters because of what it can grow into if it is left to run quietly. A child who stops raising a hand, then stops joining games, then stops accepting invitations, is not simply becoming more reserved. They are narrowing their world, one small retreat at a time, and each retreat makes the next one easier to justify. That is not a reason to panic. It is a reason to take the everyday moments seriously, and to understand that the direction of travel matters more than any single anxious afternoon.

What does not help, in most cases, is pushing a frightened child into the middle of the room and hoping they will discover it was fine. It usually confirms the fear instead. What also does not help is removing every uncomfortable situation before it starts, because that does the avoidance work for them. The useful middle ground is smaller and quieter: helping a child stay in a mildly uncomfortable moment just long enough to gather a little evidence that they can get through it — and then doing that again, and again, at a size they can actually manage.

One Small Step You Can Take Today

The step is this: pick one low-stakes social situation this week and prepare your child for it in advance, in a single sentence, without any pressure attached. Not a big event — not the school play, not a cousin's wedding. Something small and repeatable. A shop assistant to

whom they will say "thank you". A neighbour you will greet together at the door. A question they will ask a librarian. One sentence, said calmly the day before or on the way there: "Tomorrow when we get your hair cut, the barber will probably ask what you want, and you can just point if you'd rather not say." That's it. You are not coaching them to perform. You are handing them a map of a moment so it stops being a surprise.

Why this and not something bigger? Because the first job is not to make your child brave. The first job is to give them a situation they can actually picture, so their alarm has something concrete to work with instead of a vague dread. A child who knows roughly what will happen has one less unknown to manage, and unknowns are most of what feeds social fear. Suppose that your child usually freezes when an adult speaks to them directly. If you have already mentioned that the pharmacist will ask their name, the moment arrives with a script attached. They may still go quiet — that's fine — but they went quiet in a situation they had rehearsed, not one that ambushed them.

The other half of the step is what you do afterwards, and it matters more than the situation itself. On the way home, name what happened without grading it. "You looked at the barber when he asked, and then you pointed. That worked." Notice the effort and the fact that it ended, not the smoothness of the performance. Do not say "see, that wasn't scary!" — it isn't true, and children know it isn't. The honest message is quieter: it was a bit uncomfortable, you did it anyway, and here you are on the other side. That message, repeated, is what slowly builds the evidence they are missing.

To keep it going, attach the step to something that already happens every week rather than adding a new event to the calendar. The supermarket, the school run, the walk to the park — these are already in your life, so the practice costs you nothing extra. Keep the same small situation for a few weeks before widening it. Repetition with the same shop assistant or the same neighbour is worth more than variety, because familiarity is what lets a child stop bracing and start noticing that nothing bad happened.

Where People Usually Stumble

The first and most common stumble is doing the step for the child without noticing. You meant to let them order their own drink, but the queue was long and you said it for them. Or you let them practise greeting the neighbour, and then answered the neighbour's follow-up question yourself. This is not a failure of yours; it is the natural pull of wanting to smooth things over. But each time you step in, the child's alarm learns the same old lesson: I needed rescuing. Watch for the moment where you are about to speak for them, pause for two slow breaths, and see what happens. If they truly cannot manage it, you can step in —

but let them see you wait first. That visible pause is itself a message that you believed they might handle it.

The second stumble is expecting the step to feel good. This is the one that quietly derails most parents, because we are so used to wanting our children to be comfortable. Your child may complete the small step and still report that it was horrible. That is not a sign it failed; it is a sign they did something hard. If you measure success by whether they enjoyed it, you will pull back exactly when you should hold steady, and they will learn that the goal is feeling calm rather than getting through. Measure it instead by whether it happened. Discomfort during the step is expected, not evidence of a problem.

The third stumble is scaling up too fast. A child manages one word to a shop assistant, and it is tempting to think the next step is a whole conversation with a stranger. It usually isn't. The size of the step should feel almost too easy, because the point is to collect a run of small successes, not one impressive one that ends in tears. When in doubt, halve it. If your child is stumbling repeatedly at the same point, that is not stubbornness — it is a signal that the step is a size too big, and the fix is to shrink it rather than to push harder.

There is also a stumble that runs the other way: you plan the practice, your child refuses entirely, and the whole thing collapses into a negotiation you both lose. In that case, don't make the step a condition. Drop it for that day, let the situation pass naturally, and bring the same small step back next week without ceremony. The practice works through repetition over time, not through winning a standoff. A child who knows the step isn't a test will come to it more openly than one who can feel the pressure coming off you.

As for time, be honest with yourself. This is measured in weeks and months, not days. A child who has been rehearsing avoidance for a year or two will not undo that habit in a fortnight, and expecting a visible shift by next weekend will only make you read progress as failure. What you are looking for is direction: are the small steps happening a little more easily than they were a month ago? Is the recovery after an uncomfortable moment a little faster? Those are the real signs, and they arrive slowly. There will be backwards weeks — a child who managed the shop last month and won't this month — and that is part of the ordinary unevenness of it, not a verdict.

Finally, keep an eye on the bigger picture. Small steps are the right tool for ordinary shyness and everyday social worry. But if your child's world has genuinely narrowed — if they have stopped seeing friends, if school mornings have become a daily battle that isn't improving, if they seem persistently low rather than periodically nervous — that is a signal to get more support, not to try harder with the same steps. Talking to your child's teacher, or to a professional who works with children, is a sensible next step rather than an

overreaction. The small steps and the wider help are not in competition; they work together.

A Closing Word

Social anxiety and shyness are not character flaws, and your child is not broken. What you are up against is a normal alarm system that has learned to expect the worst, plus a habit of avoidance that keeps that lesson fresh. You cannot switch the alarm off by argument, and you cannot love it away. But you can change what your child's alarm is exposed to, one small, survivable situation at a time — and you can be the steady person standing beside them while they gather the evidence that they can get through it. Start smaller than feels impressive. Measure by whether the step happened, not by whether it felt good. Keep going through the backwards weeks. That is the whole method, and it is enough to change the direction of travel.

PRACTICE

1. Choose one small, repeatable social situation this week — greeting a neighbour, saying "thank you" at a till, asking a librarian a question — and prepare your child for it with one calm sentence beforehand.
2. Afterwards, name what happened without grading it: "You looked at him and then you pointed. That worked."
3. Watch for the moment you are about to speak for your child, pause for two slow breaths, and let them try.
4. Repeat the same situation for a few weeks before making it any bigger. If it keeps stalling, halve the step.

School Fear and Worry About Failure

Suppose your child wakes up on a school morning and says, plainly, "I don't want to go." Not a tantrum, not a dramatic scene — just a quiet refusal that shows up again the next day, and the day after that. Or suppose the refusal only appears on certain mornings: Sunday night, the first day back after a holiday, the morning of a test. Maybe it isn't refusal at all, but tears at the school gate, a stomachache that arrives like clockwork at breakfast, or a child who is fine all day and then falls apart at home in the evening. However it appears, the question underneath is the same: what is the child actually trying to tell you, and what should you do about it?

The shapes this takes in ordinary life are wider than most parents expect. There is the child who cries at drop-off but settles within minutes — and the child who cries at drop-off and does not settle at all. There is the child who complains of headaches or stomachaches on school mornings, genuinely feeling them, and the child who simply goes quiet and becomes withdrawn in the car. Some children resist school itself; others resist something inside school — a particular lesson, the playground, being called on in class, the moment the teacher hands back marked work. And there is the quieter version: the child who goes without protest but comes home flat, irritable, or exhausted, and who says "fine" when you ask how it was. All of these can sit under the same roof of "school fear," and they do not all need the same response from you.

Notice, too, that school fear and worry about failure often travel together, and it can be hard to see which one is leading. A child who is afraid of failing will often start to fear school, because school is where failure gets measured. A child who is anxious about being away from home may start to look like they are afraid of failing, because anxiety makes it hard to concentrate, and concentration problems look like not keeping up. When you watch carefully for a week or two — noting the days it happens, the days it doesn't, what comes before and what comes after — a pattern usually starts to show itself. That pattern is far more useful to you than any label.

What is actually going on underneath

Underneath the refusal, the tears, and the stomachaches, there is usually something quite simple: the child's body has learned to treat school as a place where something bad might happen, and it is doing its best to keep the child away from it. This is not a decision the child has made. It is closer to an alarm system that has been set too sensitively. The heart speeds up, the stomach turns, the muscles tighten — the same response that would protect

anyone from real danger, switched on in a situation that isn't actually dangerous. The problem is that the feeling is real, even when the danger isn't. A stomachache caused by anxiety hurts exactly as much as any other stomachache.

Here is the part that makes it repeat. When a child stays home because of the feeling, the feeling goes down almost immediately — relief arrives within minutes. That relief is the trap. The child's alarm system learns something in that moment: "Staying home worked." So the next morning, the alarm is a little louder, because the brain has now had one more piece of proof that school is a thing to be escaped. Each time the avoidance is repeated, the fear is strengthened rather than soothed, even though everyone in the house feels better for that day. It is one of the most frustrating patterns in childhood anxiety, because the thing that brings comfort in the short term is the very thing that feeds the problem in the long term.

Worry about failure works by a similar mechanism, just aimed inward. For some children, being wrong, being last, or being told off feels not merely unpleasant but genuinely unsafe — as though their worth is being measured and the result is bad. When that is the case, the child may avoid putting a hand up, avoid trying the hard problem, avoid the subject entirely, or freeze during a test even when they know the material. The avoidance looks like laziness from the outside. From the inside, it is protection. The child is choosing the smaller, quieter failure of not trying over the larger, louder one of trying and getting it wrong.

It helps to hold both halves of this at once: the fear is real, and the fear can be worked with. You are not trying to convince your child that school is perfectly safe and failure is nothing to worry about — no child believes that, and it isn't quite true. You are trying to help the alarm system recalibrate, slowly and gently, so that school stops registering as a threat. That takes time, repetition, and a steady adult who doesn't panic along with the child. In her book *The future generation* (1990), China Martens makes the point that children learn to face difficulty by being accompanied through it rather than pushed through it alone — a reminder that your calm presence is doing more work than any argument you could win.

It also helps to know what you are not dealing with. Occasional reluctance — a bad morning here and there, nerves before a big day — is ordinary and needs no great intervention. What calls for more attention is a pattern: the same resistance repeating across weeks, distress that doesn't fade after drop-off, physical complaints that cluster on school days, a child who is withdrawing from friends or from things they used to enjoy, or fears that are visibly shrinking their world. When you see that pattern, it is worth taking

seriously rather than waiting for it to blow over — and it is also worth remembering that taking it seriously does not mean treating it as a crisis. Small, steady attention beats dramatic gestures almost every time.

One small step you can take today

Pick one specific moment in the school morning — not the whole morning, just one moment — and make it predictable. Suppose it's the goodbye at the gate. Decide together, the evening before, exactly how it will go: where you will stand, what you will say, how many seconds it will last, and what happens next. "I'll walk you to the blue door, I'll say 'see you at three,' you'll go in, and I'll be here at three." Then do that same thing, in the same way, every day for two weeks. The sameness is the point. A child whose alarm system is set too sensitively is scanning for surprises, and a goodbye that unfolds identically each morning gives the alarm one less thing to react to.

The second half of this step matters just as much: keep the goodbye short and warm, and then actually leave. A long, lingering farewell — one more hug, one more question, one more reassurance — tells the child, without words, that there is something to be worried about here. Your steady, unhesitating departure is a message in itself: *I trust this place enough to leave you in it*. If tears come, that is allowed. Tears at the gate are not a sign the step failed; they are the feeling happening, which is what has to happen before it can settle.

To keep it going, resist the urge to change the plan when a morning goes badly. The instinct after a hard drop-off is to soften things the next day — arrive earlier, stay longer, talk it through in the car. Do the opposite. Return to the same script. Consistency across a couple of weeks is what lets the child's body learn that the goodbye is safe, and that learning happens through repetition, not through any single good morning. If you want to track it, keep a plain note of how each morning went — not to judge yourself, but because a written record shows you the slow drift that memory misses.

Where people usually stumble

The most common stumble is bargaining at the gate. It starts reasonably — "just five more minutes" — and ends with a child who has learned that resistance buys time. If you notice this happening, don't turn it into a confrontation. Name it plainly and gently, once: "We said a quick goodbye, and that's what we're doing." Then do it. The recovery is not in explaining the rule better; it is in holding it calmly the next morning, and the one after. Children test a boundary a few times to see whether it is real. A boundary that holds without anger is reassuring; a boundary that wobbles is not.

Another stumble is the rescue at the wrong moment. Suppose the child is crying at drop-off. Staying to comfort them feels kind, and sometimes it is — but if the comfort reliably arrives *because* of the crying, it can teach the child that crying is the way to keep you there. What usually works better is to offer warmth in the moment without extending the goodbye: a hug, a steady voice, "I know, I'll see you at three," and then the exit you planned. Save the longer conversation for later, at home, when the feeling has passed and you can talk about it without either of you being in the middle of it.

The third stumble is treating one hard day as proof that the whole approach is failing — or, just as often, treating one good day as proof that the problem is solved. Neither is true. School fear comes in waves, and a bad morning after two good ones is normal, not a relapse. When a wave comes, go back to the basics: the same goodbye, the same calm, the same follow-through. What you are looking for is not a straight line but a slow trend over weeks.

About how long this takes: be honest with yourself that you are measuring in weeks, not days. The avoidance pattern was built up over many mornings, and it unwinds over many mornings. Some children settle noticeably within a couple of weeks of steady consistency; others take considerably longer, especially if the worry about failure is tangled in. If after several weeks of consistent effort you see no change at all, or if the distress is deepening, that is a good moment to bring in someone with more training — a school counsellor or a child psychologist — not because you have failed, but because more hands make the work lighter. There is no prize for doing it alone.

A closing summary

School fear and worry about failure look like refusal, tears, stomachaches, or quiet withdrawal, but underneath they are one thing: a child's alarm system treating school as a place where something bad will happen, and pulling the child away from it. The trap is that avoidance brings instant relief, and that relief teaches the alarm to get louder. Your task is not to argue the fear away but to help the alarm recalibrate — through a predictable goodbye, a calm and unhesitating departure, and the patient repetition of both over weeks. Keep the goal small and steady: one moment made predictable, held consistently, and a warm, unpanicked adult beside the child while the feeling settles. If the pattern doesn't shift, or it deepens, gather more support rather than pushing harder. Slow and steady is not the lesser path here; it is the path.

PRACTICE

1. Tonight, choose one moment of the school morning and agree the exact script for it with your child — where, what is said, how long it lasts, what comes next.
2. Tomorrow, follow the script exactly, keep the goodbye short and warm, and leave without lingering.
3. Repeat the same goodbye every morning for two weeks, even after a hard day — do not change the plan in response to tears.
4. Keep a plain note of how each morning went, and look back at it after two weeks to see the trend rather than the single day.

Night Fears and Fear of the Dark

The Hour When the House Changes Shape

You have done everything right. The teeth are brushed, the story is read, the light is switched off — and then it begins. A small voice from the bedroom: one more glass of water. A request that the door stay open a little wider. A sudden, intense need to tell you something that could not possibly wait until morning. Or perhaps it is quieter than that: a child who simply will not let go of your hand, whose body tenses the moment you stand up to leave.

Does this sound like your evenings?

In daily life, this situation wears many faces. There is the child who is fine all day and falls apart at bedtime, as though a switch has been flipped. There is the one who insists on a nightlight, then a brighter nightlight, then the hallway light as well, until the house glows like an airport runway. There is the child who cannot fall asleep alone and migrates to your bed, and the one who sleeps fine but wakes in the small hours and appears silently at your bedside. There is the child who never says "I'm scared" at all, but whose bedtime stalls stretch longer and longer — another hug, another question, another trip to the bathroom — until an hour has quietly disappeared.

None of these children are being difficult on purpose. And if you have tried being firm, being patient, being both in the same week, you already know that neither approach alone makes the fear go away. That is because the fear is not really about the dark, or the water, or the door. Something else is happening underneath, and it helps to see what it is.

What Is Really Happening Underneath

Think about what bedtime actually asks of a child. All day long, their sense of safety has been carried by things they can see: your face, the shape of the living room, the noise of the house, the certainty that if something went wrong, someone would come. Then the light goes off, the door closes, and all of that disappears at once. The child is left alone with their imagination — and a child's imagination is not a calm place after dark. It is vivid, it is literal, and it does not yet reliably distinguish between "I thought of it" and "it could happen."

This is why the fear so often peaks at night specifically. It is not that darkness is inherently frightening; it is that darkness removes every external source of reassurance at the exact moment the child is most alone with their own mind. During the day, a passing worry gets

interrupted by lunch, by a sibling, by a game. At night, there are no interruptions. A worry that would last thirty seconds at noon can circle for an hour in the dark, and each circle makes it feel more real.

There is also a developmental piece worth knowing. Young children are still learning that things continue to exist when they are out of sight — including you. This is why a child can be perfectly happy at nursery and then sob at bedtime; the daytime confidence and the nighttime clinging are not contradictions. They are the same child, tested in two very different conditions.

Why It Keeps Repeating

Here is the part that surprises many parents: the fear is being kept alive, in part, by the very things that feel like solutions. Each extra glass of water, each re-check of the wardrobe, each "just five more minutes" delivers a small dose of relief. That relief is genuine — but it also teaches the child's brain something unhelpful: that the dark was indeed dangerous, and that it was survived only because you came back. The next night, the alarm is a little more sensitive.

This is not a reason to feel guilty. It is simply how reassurance works for all of us. If you have ever checked your phone one more time to settle a worry, you know the pattern from the inside. The relief is real, and it never quite lasts.

So the goal at night is not to eliminate fear — that is not within anyone's power — but to stop feeding it, gently and gradually, while making the evening itself feel predictable and safe. A child who knows exactly what will happen, in what order, and that you will always come back, has far less room for the imagination to fill in the gaps.

Judith Viorst captures this tug-of-war perfectly in her picture book *The good-bye book* (1988), where a child's dramatic protests at being left are played out with such warmth and humour that both parent and child can recognise themselves in it — the fear is real, and it is also survivable, and the goodbye is never the end of the story.

One Small Step You Can Take Tonight

You do not need to overhaul bedtime to start. Pick one thing, and make it the same thing every night. It could be that the last five minutes before lights out follow an identical order: pyjamas, teeth, one story, one song, one sentence about tomorrow. Or it could be that you tell your child, every night in the same words, exactly when you will check on them — "I will look in on you when I finish the dishes, and then I will go to bed." How

steady it stays matters more than what it says. A predictable evening gives the child's mind fewer blank spaces to fill with worry.

The other half of the step is how you leave. Keep your goodbye short, warm, and identical each time. A long, lingering exit — five hugs, three returns, a whispered conversation at the door — communicates that leaving is a big, dangerous moment, and the child will respond to that signal even if your words are reassuring. A brief, cheerful, repeatable goodbye communicates the opposite. It says: this is ordinary, this happens every night, and it always ends the same way.

To keep it going, expect the first several nights to be bumpy, and decide in advance what you will do when they are. Choose your response to the first "one more thing" call — one calm sentence, delivered from the doorway, and then the same exit again. The aim is not a perfect night. The aim is that your child begins to notice a pattern: the evening unfolds the same way, you leave the same way, and you come back when you said you would. That pattern, repeated, is what slowly teaches the brain that the dark hours are ordinary.

Where People Usually Stumble

The most common stumble is what I would call the one-time exception. Your child has had a hard day, there is a thunderstorm, you are exhausted — so you stay until they fall asleep, just this once. There is nothing wrong with this. The difficulty is that bedtime routines do not read "just this once." They read the most recent example, and the next night the standard has quietly moved. If you make an exception, make it out loud and make it temporary: "Tonight I will sit here because there is thunder. Tomorrow I go back to the usual way." Naming it keeps it an exception instead of a new rule.

The second stumble is expecting a straight line. Nights will improve, then a bad night will arrive and it will feel as though nothing has worked. This is normal and does not mean you have failed. It usually means something else is going on — a change at school, a tired week, a birthday coming up — and the fear has simply surged back up. Treat the bad night as information rather than as evidence, and return to the routine the following evening without drama. The routine is the anchor precisely because it is still there after a bad night.

The third stumble is the parent's own fear of the dark. If you were frightened at night as a child, or you still are, bedtime can quietly pull on that old thread, and you may find yourself over-checking, over-explaining, or lingering because you do not quite trust the dark yourself. Notice this with kindness. You do not have to be fearless to help your child — you only have to be steady. And if the fear is significant for you, it is worth dealing with in your own right, for your sake and theirs.

As for how long it takes: honesty first. There is no fixed number, and anyone who gives you one is guessing. What you can reasonably expect is that a consistent routine usually softens the edge of nighttime fear within a few weeks, while a fear that is very intense or has been building for a long time may take considerably longer, and may benefit from the help of a professional. Progress tends to show up as smaller things first — one fewer call from the bedroom, a shorter goodbye, a child who settles a few minutes faster — rather than as a single night when everything is suddenly fine.

If the fear is severe enough that your child is regularly losing sleep, if it is affecting their daytime mood and functioning, or if it has gone on for months with no movement, that is a good moment to speak to a paediatrician or a child mental health professional. Turning to help is not a sign that you have done something wrong. It is the same instinct that makes you check the routine in the first place.

A Short Closing

Night fears are not a sign that something has gone wrong with your child, or with your parenting. They are the predictable result of a vivid imagination meeting the one part of the day when all the visible reassurance disappears. Your job is not to argue the fear away — you cannot, and trying tends to make it louder. Your job is to make the evening predictable, to leave in the same calm way every night, to sit with the discomfort without feeding it, and to keep going after the bad nights. Small, repeated, unglamorous consistency is what changes this. Not tonight, necessarily — but over time, in a way your child will feel even before they can name it.

PRACTICE

1. Tonight, choose one fixed bedtime order and repeat it in exactly the same sequence every night this week.
2. Use the same short goodbye each night, and tell your child in specific words when you will check on them — then do exactly that.
3. Decide in advance how you will answer the first "one more thing" call: one calm sentence from the doorway, then the usual exit.
4. If you make an exception, name it out loud as a one-off and return to the routine the next night.

Intense Emotions in the Face of Uncertainty

Have you ever told a child that something was going to happen — a move, a new babysitter, a change in the usual routine — and watched their whole body change? Maybe they went quiet and clingy. Maybe they asked the same question over and over: "But what time? Who will be there? What if you're late?" Maybe they cried over something that looked, from the outside, like nothing at all. If you've seen that, you've already met this chapter's subject: the intense feelings that come up when a child doesn't know exactly what's ahead.

Uncertainty comes in many everyday shapes. It's the week before a new school year, when the classroom, the teacher, and the other children are all unknown. It's the morning a parent leaves on a trip and the house feels different before the door has even closed. It's a doctor's appointment where nobody has explained what will happen in the room. It's a family schedule that shifts without warning — a late pickup, a cancelled visit, a plan that changes at the last minute. Sometimes it's the big things, and sometimes it's a small break in the routine that an adult would barely notice. Either way, the child's reaction can look far larger than the event.

What the reaction is really built on

Underneath all of this is something simple: a child's sense of safety depends heavily on being able to predict what comes next. Adults carry around a rough map of the near future — what today holds, who will be where, roughly how things will go. Children are still building that map, and when a piece of it is missing, the gap gets filled with imagination. That's the mechanism. Not naughtiness, not manipulation, not weakness. When the information is missing, the mind fills the space, and a child's mind tends to fill it with the most alarming possibility available. "You'll be late" becomes "you might not come." "A new teacher" becomes "nobody will know me."

This is why the intensity so often seems out of proportion. The child isn't reacting to the change in front of them; they're reacting to the story their mind has built inside the gap. And because young children don't yet have the words to say "I'm uncomfortable because I can't predict the shape of tomorrow," the feeling arrives through the body instead — tears, clinging, stomachaches, big questions, small regressions. The behaviour is the message, not the problem.

Why it repeats

The repeating is the part that wears adults down. The same question about the same trip, ten times. The same bedtime worry, night after night. It helps to see why the loop holds. Anxiety behaves less like a fire that burns out and more like an alarm checking whether the door is locked. Each question is a child reaching out to be reassured — but reassurance that removes the worry only for a moment leaves the deeper need untouched: the need to know how to cope with not knowing. So the question comes back, and the adult, exhausted, answers again, and both parties end up stuck in a loop that feels like it's going nowhere.

There's a second reason the loop repeats: avoidance works, briefly. When a child avoids the uncertain thing, the fear drops immediately, and that relief teaches the brain that avoidance was the right move. The next time uncertainty appears, the alarm is a little louder. You can see this in miniature whenever a difficult morning is skipped rather than worked through. Nothing terrible happens that day — but the fear is quietly instructed to come back stronger.

Joy Berry, in her 1984 book *Separation*, frames this for children in language they can hold onto: the feelings that come with being apart from someone you rely on are real and allowed, and they can be talked about rather than hidden. That small move — naming the feeling as something normal instead of something wrong — is often the first crack in the loop. It doesn't resolve the uncertainty, but it gives the child somewhere to put the feeling other than their stomach or their tears.

One small step you can take today

Pick the uncertainty that's coming up soonest — the one you already know is going to be hard. Don't pick the biggest fear in the house; pick something within reach this week. Then do one thing: tell the child what's going to happen, in order, before it happens. Not a speech. A short, plain sequence of events they can hold in their head. Suppose a grandparent is picking them up on Thursday instead of you. Instead of mentioning it on Thursday morning, say on Tuesday: "Thursday is different. Grandma picks you up. She comes at the usual time, you go home with her, and I'm back before dinner." Then say it again on Wednesday. Same words, same order. That's the whole step.

The order matters more than the detail. Children don't need every fact about the day; they need the shape of it — what comes first, what comes next, and how it ends. "First this, then that, then I come back" is the sentence they're actually asking for, even when the words coming out of their mouth are "but what if you're late?" Ending on the return or the finish is important, because that's the part their mind has been filling in with something bad.

Keeping it going is mostly about repetition and honesty. Repeat the plan at natural moments — at breakfast, in the car — without waiting for the worry to appear. If something genuinely changes, say so as soon as you know, even if the new plan is less convenient than the old one. The goal is not a perfectly stable life; it's a child learning that when things shift, they find out early and the information is true. That lesson only works if the information really is true, so resist the urge to soften a change by hiding it until the last minute.

Where people usually stumble

The first stumble is reassurance that does the wrong job. When the question comes for the fifth time, the instinct is to answer it fully again, with more detail, more certainty, more promises. It feels kind, and for a moment it works. But if the only thing that calms the child is an adult removing the doubt, then the child learns that doubt is unbearable and only someone else can fix it. The alternative is to answer the question once, warmly and clearly, then shift to what the child can do: "I already told you — Dad picks you up. What could you do while you wait if you start to feel worried?" You're not refusing to comfort them. You're moving the comfort from "I'll make the fear disappear" to "you have something to do with the fear."

The second stumble is the skipped morning. It's the day of the uncertain thing, the child is crying, and the easiest path is to cancel — keep them home, delay the appointment, drive them yourself instead of the bus. Sometimes that's genuinely right. But when it becomes the pattern, the relief is teaching the fear to grow, as described earlier. The middle path is to shrink the step rather than remove it: go partway, stay a few minutes longer at the door, let them take the bus one stop. Something small that still counts as going toward the thing, not away from it.

The third stumble is expecting the adult's calm to be enough. You can explain the plan perfectly, stay steady, and still get a hard morning. That isn't failure, and it isn't a sign the approach doesn't work. It usually means the child needs the same message repeated across several occasions before it settles — which is why the repeating plan, said in the same words, matters. Notice the small signs of progress rather than the absence of tears: the question asked four times instead of fifteen, the child who packs their bag without being reminded, the worry mentioned in the past tense.

And how long does it take? Honestly, longer than a single conversation and usually less than forever. Think in weeks of consistent small steps, not days. There will be good stretches and sudden hard days, often around a new change rather than a repeat of the old one. If the worry is genuinely blocking daily life over a long stretch — school refusal that

doesn't ease, physical symptoms that keep recurring, distress that doesn't respond to anything you try — that's the point to talk to a professional rather than keep pushing alone.

A short closing

Intense feelings in the face of uncertainty aren't a flaw in your child, and they aren't a verdict on your parenting. They're what happens when a mind still building its map of the future meets a gap. Your job isn't to seal every gap or promise a perfectly predictable world — you can't, and pretending otherwise only sets up the next disappointment. Your job is smaller and steadier: give the child the shape of what's coming, tell the truth when it changes, let the feeling be named and allowed, and take small steps toward the uncertain thing rather than around it. Do that often enough and the message sinks in — not that nothing bad ever happens, but that not knowing is something they can get through.

PRACTICE

1. Choose one upcoming change this week and tell the child the plan in plain order — first, then, and how it ends — using the same words each time you repeat it.
2. When the same question comes again, answer it once clearly, then ask what they could do while they wait.
3. On the hard day, shrink the step instead of skipping it — go partway, stay a little longer, or take one stop rather than none.
4. Notice and name one small sign of progress each week, and give it a few weeks before judging whether it's working.

Why Minimizing Fears Does Not Work

Think about the last time a child you love was frightened. Perhaps it was a thunderstorm, or a dark hallway, or the moment you turned to leave them at a classroom door. What did you say? For most of us, the first words out of our mouths are some version of "There's nothing to be scared of." It comes out almost automatically, the way we reach for a light switch. We say it because we want the fear gone, and we want it gone quickly.

The Many Faces of "There's Nothing to Be Scared Of"

That sentence takes different shapes depending on the day. Sometimes it's a gentle dismissal: "Don't worry, it's fine." Sometimes it's a logical argument: "Look, nothing is hiding under the bed." Sometimes it arrives before the child has even finished their sentence, a reflex so fast it's clear we were already bracing for the fear. And sometimes it comes with a hint of impatience, especially when the same fear returns for the fifth night in a row: "We talked about this already."

None of these versions are unkind. They come from a good place, from a wish to protect. But notice what each one shares: they all treat the fear as something to be cancelled rather than something to be understood. The child brings you a feeling, and you hand it back with a label that says it's not real.

Why the Reassurance Keeps Coming Back

Here is what tends to happen next. Your child calms down for a moment — maybe because your calm voice steadies them, maybe because they don't want to argue — and then the fear returns the next night, or the next time you go to the door. Parents often feel stuck here. They say, "I've told them a hundred times there's nothing to be afraid of," as if repetition alone should have worked by now.

But the repetition is the clue. The reassurance isn't sticking, because it was never answering the question the child was actually asking. Saying "there's nothing to be scared of" addresses the content of the fear — the monster, the dark, the new classroom — while leaving the feeling itself untouched.

What Is Really Going On Underneath

To understand why this happens, you have to see what fear does inside a person. Fear isn't a mistake in the child's thinking that can be corrected with facts. It's a whole-body response, one that rises before words catch up. When a child is frightened, they are not

primarily a small debater who has gotten their premises wrong. They are a person whose alarm system has gone off, and an alarm system doesn't listen to arguments. It listens for safety.

This is the core of the problem: your words are reaching the thinking part of your child while the fear is coming from somewhere deeper. So when you say "there's nothing to be scared of," a child can understand the sentence perfectly and still feel exactly as frightened. What they hear underneath the words is that the fear they are feeling isn't worth discussing, and the sooner they stop showing it, the better.

The Lesson the Reassurance Actually Teaches

There's a quieter problem with reassurance, and it's easy to miss. When a child brings you a fear and you answer by saying it doesn't exist, the fear doesn't vanish — it simply goes underground. And anything that goes underground needs hiding, which means the child learns to hide it from you.

A child who is told repeatedly that there's nothing to be scared of will often stop mentioning the fear, not because it's gone but because mentioning it hasn't been useful. The worrying keeps happening in silence, at bedtime, in the hallway, on the walk to school, and you may notice only the symptoms: a sudden reluctance to go upstairs alone, a stomachache on Monday mornings, a stiffness around new people.

Why a Child Cannot Simply Stop

It's worth pausing on how impossible the request actually is. "There's nothing to be scared of" is, at heart, a request that the child stop feeling what they feel. And feelings don't answer to requests. Think of a time you were nervous about something — a job interview, a difficult conversation — and someone told you not to be nervous. Did the nervousness lift? Or did you simply feel more alone with it?

Children meet the same wall. They cannot switch off the fear on command. The best they can do is hide it, which brings us back to the same place: a child who looks calm on the outside and is carrying something heavy on the inside. The reassurance fixes the visible behaviour, which is why it feels like it works, while the fear keeps living underneath.

The Real Message Behind "Nothing to Be Scared Of"

There is a subtle implication buried in that familiar phrase. If there is nothing to be scared of, and yet I feel scared, then the thing that has gone wrong must be me. The child doesn't form this thought in words — it's more like a shape the experience takes. The feeling

arrives, the adult says it shouldn't be there, and the child concludes that their inner world is faulty or wrong.

This is where diminishing fears does its most lasting damage. It doesn't just fail to remove the fear; it teaches the child a bad relationship with their own emotions. The message becomes: strong, sensible children don't feel this way; you do; so hide it. Over time, that habit hardens, and the child grows into someone who dismisses their own anxiety as silly before they've even given it a fair look.

The good news is that this doesn't require a long speech or a perfect script. It requires one small change in what happens in the first few seconds after a child tells you they're scared. The change is this: instead of arguing with the fear, name it and accept it. "You're really scared of the dark right now." That's it. No lecture, no fixing, no explaining why the dark is safe. Just telling the child what you see.

Suppose your child says there's a monster in the closet. The old reflex says, "There's no monster, look, I'll open the door." The new response says, "Something about that closet is scaring you tonight." You are not agreeing that a monster exists. You are agreeing that the fear exists, and that it's worth taking seriously. Those are two very different things, and children can feel the difference. The first response tells them to stop feeling; the second tells them they're allowed to feel, and that they don't have to feel it alone.

Try this today, on the very next fear your child brings you. Take one breath before you answer, so the reflex doesn't get there first. Then say what you notice: "You look worried about tomorrow." Or "You don't want me to leave yet." Then stop and wait. Let the silence do its work. The child will often say more, and what they say is far more useful than anything you could have guessed. You are not trying to solve the fear in this moment; you are trying to become the person they bring fears to. That's the whole step, and it's enough for today.

Keeping It Going Without Turning It Into a Project

The risk with any new habit is that it becomes a performance. You start narrating every feeling in the house, and your child, who is not stupid, notices that Mum or Dad has read something. So keep it small and uneven. Use the naming response when the fear is real and present, and let the ordinary moments stay ordinary. If your child isn't scared, there's nothing to name. This isn't a technique to apply constantly; it's a door you leave unlocked.

It also helps to say the quiet part out loud now and then. A sentence like "It's okay to feel scared, and I'm still here" does more than any explanation of why the fear is irrational. And

when you get it wrong — you will, especially on tired evenings — you can repair it simply: "Earlier I told you there was nothing to worry about. I don't think that helped. Tell me again what it feels like." Repairing a dismissal teaches your child something valuable: that feelings can be returned to, that nothing is ruined, that the conversation stays open.

Where People Usually Stumble

The most common stumble is the silence problem. You name the fear, you wait, and your child says nothing, or shrugs, or changes the subject. Parents often read this as failure and fill the gap with reassurance, which puts you right back where you started. But silence after naming a feeling is not rejection. It may mean the child is thinking, or that they're not used to being asked, or simply that they're eight years old and tired. Let the silence sit. You can add one gentle line — "You don't have to talk about it, I just wanted you to know I noticed" — and leave it there.

The second stumble is impatience, usually on the third or fourth night of the same fear. It's completely normal to feel your own frustration rising when you've been patient and nothing has changed. When that happens, don't aim your frustration at the fear. Aim it at the situation: "I'm feeling a bit tired tonight, so let's keep this short." Naming your own state honestly models exactly what you're asking of your child. What you're trying not to do is the thing that started this chapter: implying the fear shouldn't be there.

The third stumble is expecting the fear to disappear once you've handled it well. It usually doesn't, not straight away. Fears often fade slowly and unevenly, and a bad night after several good ones is not a sign you've gone backwards. Realistically, this is a matter of weeks and months rather than days, and the change you're looking for is not the absence of fear. It's your child coming to you with it, sooner and more openly, instead of carrying it alone. That shift often shows up before the fear itself softens, and it's worth noticing when it does.

A Short Closing Summary

Saying "there's nothing to be scared of" fails for a simple reason: it answers the fear with a fact when what the child needs is to be met. The fear doesn't disappear when it's argued with; it goes quiet and gets carried alone. Diminishing a fear also teaches a child something lasting — that their inner world is a problem to hide. The alternative isn't a big speech or a cure. It's a small, repeatable move: name what you see, accept the feeling without endorsing the danger, and stay. Do it imperfectly, repair it when you miss, and give it time.

PRACTICE

1. The next time your child expresses a fear, take one breath before responding, then name the feeling: "You're really scared right now."
2. Resist the urge to explain why the fear is irrational; instead say, "It's okay to feel scared, and I'm still here."
3. If your child goes quiet, let the silence sit and add only: "You don't have to talk about it — I just wanted you to know I noticed."
4. At the end of the week, recall one moment you handled well and one you'd like to repair, and offer the repair out loud.

The Limits of Constant Reassurance

Think about the last time your child was frightened and you stepped in straight away. Maybe it was a noise in the hallway at bedtime, maybe a worry about a spelling test the next morning, maybe hesitation before a birthday party where they knew almost no one. What did you do? If you're like most loving parents, you moved toward the worry. You stayed in the room a little longer, you promised the test would be fine, you offered to skip the party or stood beside them the whole afternoon. That instinct to soothe is not a flaw. It is one of the most natural things a parent does.

It is worth noticing, though, how many different situations get answered with the same move. A child worries that something bad will happen to you while you're apart, and you give a long explanation of exactly where you'll be at every moment. A child cries at the school gate, and you walk them all the way to the classroom door, then wait to make sure they settled. A child fears the dark, and the light stays on for the next two years, or someone sleeps in their room, or the room gets checked twice before sleep. A child is nervous about a piano recital, and you promise it will be perfect, or offer to cancel it altogether. Run right away to fix the feeling—that's what this pattern is. In the moment it looks like comfort, and it is delivered with real love. Over time, though, it quietly teaches the child something nobody intended them to learn.

The question I want to leave with you for now is a simple one, and it isn't meant to make you feel guilty. What if some of this comforting is doing something other than what we think it's doing? Not all of it—and not all at once—but in certain repeated situations, at certain moments of growth, the very thing that dries a tear may also be feeding the fear. That is a strange idea to sit with. Hold it lightly as you read on.

What reassurance teaches, quietly

Here is the plain mechanism underneath it. Anxiety works like this: a child feels a wave of fear, the fear says *something bad is about to happen*, the child reaches for a grown-up, and the grown-up makes the bad feeling go away. In that moment the child learns two things, and both of them feel good. First, that the world has a rescuer in it. Second, that the fear itself is a signal worth acting on immediately—that it must be answered, every time, with someone else's help.

The second lesson is the one that causes problems. Each time the fear is answered quickly and completely, the child's brain notes the sequence: alarm, then rescue, then relief. The bookkeeping inside that little sequence matters more than any conversation you'll ever

have with them about being brave. It says: *fear is dangerous, and the answer to danger is to find someone and have them make it stop*. So the next time a similar fear appears, the alarm rings louder and sooner, because it has been confirmed that this is a genuine emergency requiring immediate outside help. The fear gets practice at being answered. It does not get practice at being survived.

This is why the pattern repeats. You are not dealing with a one-time problem; you are running a loop, and each pass around the loop tightens it. The reassurance eases the child for now, the ease is real, and because it works in the short term it is very hard to see its long-term cost. Many well-meaning adults keep the loop going for years without ever noticing it's a loop, because each individual moment looks like good parenting rather than a pattern.

Why the relief never quite lasts

Notice what happens after reassurance. The child relaxes, and often a specific amount of relaxing happens—an hour, an evening, a car ride—before a new question arrives. *Are you sure you'll be back on time? Are you sure there's no monster in the closet? Are you sure my friend will still want to play with me tomorrow?* The answer you gave a moment ago has stopped working. The question comes back slightly different, and it comes back because it was never really a question. It was a request for relief, and relief fades like any feeling fades.

That fading is not a fault in you or a failure of your answer. It is how anxious feelings work. They do not get smaller when you argue with them; they recede, and then they come back a little sturdier, asking for the next installment. I want to be careful here—this doesn't make you responsible for every fear your child carries, and it doesn't mean one kind word causes a lifetime of anxiety. It means that if reassurance is the main tool and nothing else is being built alongside it, the tool wears out. You give the answer, the fear comes back, you give it again, and gradually the child starts to trust the ritual more than they trust themselves.

Avoidance looks like kindness

Now shift to the other half of the pattern: taking the child out of the hard situation, or letting them stay out of it. The child is frightened of a sleepover, so they don't go. The child is upset about the school trip, so they stay home. The child is shy around a cousin they don't see often, so you answer for them and shield them from having to speak. Every one of these choices is understandable, and every one is made from love. And every one

carries a hidden message the child will absorb: *you were right to be afraid; this was too much for you; the way through is around.*

Avoidance also works, which is the reason it's so persuasive. The child does calm down once you've cancelled the trip or agreed that no, they don't have to go in. The tension in the room drops. It feels like you solved something. What actually happened is that the fear got a little stronger, because the fear's central claim—*this situation is dangerous*—was never tested and never disproven. A fear that is never met with the situation learns to expect the situation's removal. Over time the list of things that must be avoided tends to grow, not shrink, because each avoided situation adds a new entry to the list of things the child believes they cannot handle.

This is a hard thing to hear, so let's be gentle about it. You are not creating your child's anxiety by protecting them. You are, though, letting anxiety keep the upper hand in a very specific way: you're letting it write the rules. *The fear says what happens. The child asks for escape, and the escape is granted, and the fear gets to say that its request was right.* What the child needs, deep down, is the experience of having a fear and being in the situation anyway—with you nearby, at first, but with the situation still happening. That experience, repeated at a pace the child can actually manage, is the only thing that reliably teaches a worried brain that it was wrong about the danger.

That last part—at a pace the child can actually manage—matters more than anything. Nobody is suggesting that you push a frightened child into the deep end to teach them to swim. The point of this chapter isn't a call to be harder. It's a call to look honestly at the difference between comfort that steadies a child and comfort that teaches a child they cannot steady themselves. Most of us drift toward the second kind without noticing, because it's the kind that makes the crying stop sooner. The purpose of the next part of the chapter is to look at how reassurance and avoidance can be adjusted—a little at a time, without turning your home into a training camp—so that comfort still does its job while something sturdier grows alongside it.

themselves unable to handle. What began as one difficult sleepover becomes a general suspicion of sleepovers, then of being away from home at all, and the world quietly narrows.

One small step you can take today

Pick exactly one worry—not the biggest one, one that comes up often and is mild enough to work on. Suppose it's the bedtime question about whether you'll check on them, or the small hesitation before walking into a familiar activity. Tonight or tomorrow, when that

worry appears, resist the urge to answer it the way you always have. Don't argue with it, don't explain at length, and don't dismiss it either. Instead, name what you notice, warmly and briefly: "I can see that thought is bothering you again." Then stay nearby without solving it. Sit with them for a minute, say something steady like "I'm right here, and you're okay," and then let the moment be slightly unfinished. That's the whole step. You are not abandoning your child; you are removing one small brick from the loop.

The key is the size. If you try to change everything at once—no more checking, no more reassurance, no more staying home—you will likely cave by Wednesday, and caving after a big push teaches the fear something worse than before. One worry, one small refusal to complete the ritual, repeated over days, is what actually shifts things. Expect the worry to push back a little. That's normal, and it's not a sign you've harmed your child; it's a sign the old pattern noticed the gap.

To keep it going, pick one replacement line and use it consistently, because consistency is doing the real work. Something like "I know that feels scary, and I think you can handle this bit." Say it calmly, say it the same each time, and then hold your ground gently.

Children read steadiness far more than they read speeches. If you wobble one night and give the full reassurance again, that's fine—notice it, and return to your one small step the next time. You are building a habit, not passing a test.

Where people usually stumble

The most common stumble is this: the first attempt goes badly—tears, anger, a miserable evening—and the parent concludes it was the wrong approach. But tears during a change are not evidence of damage; they are evidence that a habit is being asked to loosen. Some of the hardest evenings come right before a shift, when the old routine no longer delivers and the new one hasn't earned trust yet. The stumble isn't the bad evening. The stumble is deciding, on the strength of one bad evening, that nothing can ever change.

The second stumble is going it alone and getting no support. If one parent holds the line while the other hands out reassurance, the loop survives intact, just with more confusion. It helps to agree, quietly and out of the child's earshot, on what you're both doing and what you're both not doing. If you can't agree completely, agree on one thing—the replacement line, or the single situation you'll handle the same way—and let the rest stay as it is for now. Changes that cause arguments between adults rarely help the child.

The third stumble is expecting a straight line. Some days will be better, some will feel like a return to the start. That back-and-forth is how learning actually looks from the inside.

When a hard day comes, don't treat it as proof of failure and don't over-correct by tightening everything. Return to your one step, keep your tone warm, and carry on.

As for time: think in weeks, not days. A pattern built up over months or years won't loosen in a weekend, and anyone promising otherwise is selling something. In my experience the realistic shape is this—the first week or two feels rougher, the next few weeks feel mixed, and somewhere after that you notice the worry arriving less often or with less force. Small, steady changes held over a season tend to matter more than a dramatic push that lasts four days.

A short closing summary

Reassurance and avoidance both work in the moment, and that is exactly why they're so hard to give up. Answering the fear dries the tears now and quietly teaches the child that fear must be answered; removing the child from the hard thing calms the room now and teaches the child that the way through is around. Neither is a failure of love—both usually are love, applied too automatically. The way out is small and unglamorous: choose one worry, change one move, keep your tone warm, expect pushback, and measure progress in weeks. You are not trying to stop comforting your child. You are trying to let them discover they can survive a small amount of discomfort with you standing beside them rather than in front of them.

PRACTICE

- Pick one mild, recurring worry today and write down the reassurance or avoidance you usually give it.
- Choose one short, steady sentence to say instead ("I know that feels scary, and I think you can handle this bit") and use it the same way each time the worry appears.
- Stay close and warm without solving the feeling for them, and let the moment end slightly unfinished.
- Afterwards, agree quietly with any other caregiver on the single change you're both making, and mark progress by the week—not by the day.

Small Steps: Practicing Courage Together with Your Child

Have you ever watched your child cling to your leg at a birthday party, or refuse to walk into a room where the lights are off, or dissolve into tears at the school gate — and felt that tug between wanting to protect them and knowing you can't carry them through every door? Most parents know this moment. It arrives in different shapes.

For one family it's the child who won't sleep alone, appearing in the doorway every night. For another it's the child who is fine at home but silent at school, or the one who cries before every swimming lesson and then enjoys it once they're in the water. Sometimes it's a child who asks the same worried question again and again — will you be there when I come out? — no matter how many times you've answered. And sometimes it's the child who simply avoids: the playdate declined, the new class resisted, the dark hallway taken at a run.

What these situations share is a pattern of retreat from something that feels too big. The child isn't being difficult. Something in the situation has registered as risky, and the child has found the safest response they know — moving toward you, staying silent, staying home, or staying away.

It helps to understand what's happening underneath. When a child feels threatened, their body responds the way anyone's does: heart faster, muscles tense, attention narrowed onto the danger. This alarm system is not a flaw. It is what keeps a child from walking into traffic. The problem is only that it fires for things that aren't actually dangerous — the dark, a new teacher, the sound of raised voices — and it fires quickly, long before the thinking part of the brain has had a chance to weigh in. A young child's reasoning is still under construction, so the alarm tends to win.

This is why telling a frightened child "there's nothing to be scared of" rarely lands. From the inside, the fear is not an opinion to be corrected. It's a bodily fact. The child's chest is tight, their stomach is churning, and no sentence from you can argue with a racing heart. What they need first is for you to take the feeling seriously — not to agree that the danger is real, but to show them that you believe the fear is.

The other piece of the mechanism is what happens after the fear: the retreat. Each time a child avoids the scary thing and feels relief, the relief teaches the brain something. It says: good, we escaped, that was right to fear, let's do that again. So the pattern repeats, and often grows. The child who is excused from the dark bedroom once will need excusing

again, and the avoidance gathers a little more weight each time. This is not a sign of weakness in your child or a failure in your parenting. It is just how learning works.

And it's also why it's so hard to break as a parent, because every part of you wants to make the fear stop. Handing them the answer, turning on the light, letting them stay home — these are acts of love. The trick, and it is a delicate one, is to pair that love with the small, steady nudging that helps them discover for themselves that they can cope.

The nudge doesn't have to be big. In fact, it works better when it's small enough to seem almost unremarkable. The mistake many of us make is thinking courage means a leap — the child suddenly walking into the dark room alone, or marching into school without a backward glance. Real courage is built in steps so small that the child barely notices they're climbing.

Here is one you can try today. Pick a single fear, the mildest version of it, and shrink it until it feels manageable for both of you. Suppose the fear is the dark hallway. Don't ask your child to walk it alone. Instead, stand together at the entrance and count to ten — just stand there, in the half-light, with you beside them. That's it. That's the step. Tomorrow, take one step further in, or stay for fifteen counts instead of ten. The size doesn't matter. What matters is that the child does the thing while feeling afraid, and discovers that the fear passes and nothing bad follows.

The key is to let the child choose the step wherever possible. Ask them: what feels like a small stretch, not a big one? A child who helps design the step is a child who owns it. They might decide to walk three steps into the hallway before turning back, or to sit on the edge of the bed with the light off for one minute. Whatever they pick, respect it — even if it seems tiny to you. The goal isn't to conquer the fear today. The goal is to prove, one small moment at a time, that fear can be felt without being obeyed.

Then comes the part that keeps it going: repetition and celebration. Repeat the same small step several times before moving on, until it stops feeling like a stretch. And when your child does it — even halfway, even badly — notice it out loud. Not "well done for being brave" as a vague prize, but something specific: "You stood there for the whole ten counts, even though you were scared. I saw that." Naming exactly what they did helps the child file it away as something they can do again.

Where the Steps Go Wrong

The most common stumble is going too fast. A child does the small step once, feels proud, and suddenly the adult's hope leaps ahead — the next day we push for the full challenge,

and the child recoils. The fear comes flooding back, and the retreat is worse than before. This isn't a failure of the child. It's a sign the step was too big. If that happens, go back to the smaller version, stay there longer, and let success settle before reaching again.

Another stumble is what you might call the accidental rescue. The child is standing in the dark hallway, breathing hard, and every instinct in you wants to flick the switch or pull them back to safety. Sometimes you will. That's human, and it doesn't undo the work. What helps is to catch yourself gently — "I switched the light on because I wanted to help, but I think you could have done it" — and try again tomorrow. The repair matters more than the perfect run.

There is also the stumble of the fear shifting shape. A child who stops clinging at the school gate may start worrying about the walk home instead. This is normal. Fear is not a single enemy that you defeat once; it moves around. The skills you're building — facing something small, tolerating the feeling, noticing it pass — transfer to the new worry too. You're not chasing symptoms. You're teaching a method.

And be realistic about time. This is not a two-week project. For some children, a mild fear loosens in a matter of days; for others, the same fear takes months of steady small steps, and there will be days that go backward. A backward day is not the end of progress. It's part of the ordinary shape of learning, the way a child learning to walk falls many times without anyone concluding they'll never walk. Judge progress over weeks, not days, and resist the temptation to compare your child's pace with anyone else's.

A Word to Carry With You

You are not trying to remove fear from your child's life — that's neither possible nor desirable. You are trying to hand them something sturdier: the experience of feeling afraid and coping anyway. Each small step, repeated gently, teaches them that fear is a feeling that comes and goes, and that they are the one who decides what to do while it's there. That lesson is worth more than any fear conquered.

And you don't need to get every step right. You need only to keep going — small step, repeat, notice, adjust. That is the whole method. Today's step is enough.

PRACTICE

1. With your child, pick one mild fear and agree on the smallest possible first step — one they help choose.
2. Do that one step together today, staying for a short, fixed time.
3. Say out loud exactly what they did, not just "good job."
4. Repeat the same step a few times before making it slightly bigger; if it goes wrong, go back to the smaller version.

Regulating Yourself as a Parent

Have you ever noticed that the moment your child's voice gets shaky, your own chest gets tight — and you're the one who's supposed to be the calm one in the room?

It happens in small, ordinary ways. Your child clings to your leg at the doorway of a birthday party, and before you've decided anything, your jaw has tightened and your voice has gone sharp. Your child says their stomach hurts on a school morning, and you feel a flicker of irritation, then guilt about the irritation, then a wave of worry that something is really wrong. Your child lies awake afraid of the dark, and you find yourself lying awake afterward too, running through the same fears on a loop. You say "there's nothing to be afraid of" a little too quickly, a little too loudly. Or you check the hallway light for the third time, reassure them for the tenth time, and hear your own voice getting thinner each time.

None of this makes you a bad parent. It makes you a person whose alarm system is wired to the person you love most. That wiring is not a flaw; it is what makes you attentive. But it does mean that your child's fear rarely lands in a quiet room. It lands in a room where someone else is already reacting.

The loop underneath

Here is the plain mechanism. Fear is contagious between people, and it travels fastest from the person a child trusts most. Children don't learn mainly from what we tell them. They learn from what they read in our faces, our breathing, our pace, the way we hold ourselves when we think no one is watching. When you stay steady while your child is frightened, their nervous system gets a message — something like *the grown-up isn't alarmed, so this must be survivable*. When your own alarm goes off, the opposite message arrives, and it arrives without a single word being spoken: *even the adult is rattled, so this really must be dangerous*.

This is the part that catches people off guard. You can offer perfect reassurance and still transmit alarm. Suppose that your child cries at the school gate. If your face tightens with pity and your voice wobbles as you say "it's fine, don't worry," the words say one thing and the body says another, and children believe the body. This is why some reassurance seems to make things worse: it is reassurance delivered from inside the worry, so it confirms the worry rather than settling it.

Why it repeats

The loop keeps running because both sides are doing something understandable. Your child shows fear; you feel it as your own; you try to make it go away, often by over-explaining, over-checking, or hurrying past the moment. Those efforts bring short bursts of relief, and relief is a powerful teacher. If checking the closet once more soothes your child for a minute — and soothes you too — the two of you have just practiced checking. The fear gets a little more room next time, and so does your need to fix it.

Then there is the guilt, which quietly keeps the cycle alive. You notice you were tense, and you resolve to do better, and now you're watching yourself anxiously while trying to be calm. That self-monitoring is itself a form of tension. Your child, always reading you, notices that something is being managed. It can be gentler to accept that you will sometimes be nervous too, and then to notice the difference between feeling nervous and acting on it. The feeling can be there. It doesn't have to run the room.

What calm actually looks like

It helps to be honest about what this is not. It is not a performance of serenity, and it is not pretending you are unafraid. Children see through both, and a child who senses that worry is not allowed will often hide their own. Real steadiness is quieter and less impressive. It usually looks like slowing down rather than off-loading. It looks like one short sentence instead of a speech. It looks like a hand on a shoulder and a breath taken before you answer.

Sometimes it looks like saying plainly, "I'm here, and we'll figure this out together," and then letting silence do part of the work. You are not giving your child a promise that nothing bad will happen; you are giving them something more solid, which is the experience that their fear can be felt without the grown-up falling apart. That experience, repeated over ordinary days, is what builds the ground they will stand on later.

One small step you can take today

Pick the moment that repeats most often in your house — the school doorway, the bedtime hallway, the birthday-party entrance — and decide in advance what your body will do there. Not what you'll say; what you'll do. One slow breath out before you speak. Shoulders dropped on purpose. Your voice kept low and a little slower than feels natural. That's the whole step. You are not trying to feel calm; you are giving your body one small instruction it can follow even while your chest is tight.

Then decide what you'll say, and keep it to one short sentence. Suppose the school gate is the hard spot. Something like "I know. I'll be here at three" — said once, at normal

volume, with your face as soft as you can manage. Not a speech, not a negotiation, not a list of reasons the day will be fine. Say it, squeeze their hand, and go. The brevity is not coldness; it's the thing that keeps your own alarm from leaking into your voice. Long reassurance is usually worry wearing a kind face, and children can hear the difference.

To keep it going, choose one thing to notice afterward rather than one thing to fix. At the end of the day, ask yourself a single question: did I slow down before I spoke, or did I rush? No grading, no verdict on yourself as a parent — just the observation. Pick the same moment again tomorrow. Small and repeated beats big and abandoned: a doorway handled steadily across a few weeks teaches more than one heroic calm morning followed by a month of tense ones. If you want, tell another adult what you're practicing, so the moment doesn't live only inside your own head.

Where people usually stumble

The most common stumble is expecting the step to work on the child. You breathe out, you keep your voice low, you say your one sentence — and your child still cries. It's easy to read that as failure. It isn't. The step was never a lever for producing a quiet child; it was practice in being the steady one while the feeling is present. Measured that way, a hard morning where you stayed low and slow is a success, even though the morning itself was hard.

The second stumble is catching yourself mid-reaction and then drowning in guilt about it. You snapped. You over-reassured for the ninth time. Now you're rehearsing the moment in your head at midnight. The repair matters far more than the slip: a short, plain "I got a bit worried back there too — that's mine, not yours" does more for your child's sense of safety than a flawless performance ever could, because it shows that feelings can be named and survived. Then let it go. Turning the slip into another thing to be anxious about just feeds the same loop in a different costume.

The third stumble is hoping the road will run perfectly straight. You'll have a week of steadier doorways and then a morning that undoes your confidence entirely — often on a day you're tired, rushed, or already carrying something else. That's not a relapse; it's ordinary. Realistically, expect weeks rather than days for a new way of responding to feel less forced, and longer still before your child's behavior shifts in response. And sometimes it won't shift much at all, because some fears simply take their time. Your steadiness is still doing its quiet work underneath, whether or not you get to see the proof on any given morning.

A short closing summary

Your child's fear lands in a room where another person is already reacting, and that person is you. You can't switch off your own alarm, and you don't need to — you only need to stop it from running the room. Real steadiness is unimpressive: a breath out, a low voice, one short sentence, a hand on a shoulder, and the willingness to let the feeling be there without falling apart over it. Pick one recurring moment, slow yourself down in it, notice afterward without grading, and repair quickly when you slip. Do that across ordinary weeks, and you're giving your child the most solid thing you have to offer — not a promise that nothing bad will happen, but the lived experience that fear can be felt, and the grown-up stays standing.

PRACTICE

1. Choose the one moment that repeats most in your home and decide in advance what your body will do there: one slow breath out, shoulders dropped, a low and slightly slower voice.
2. Prepare one short sentence for that moment ("I know. I'll be here at three") and say it once, without adding reasons or extra reassurance.
3. Each evening, ask yourself one question only — did I slow down before I spoke, or did I rush? — and repeat the same moment tomorrow.
4. When you slip, repair it briefly and plainly ("I got a bit worried too — that's mine"), then let it go instead of rehearsing it.

When to Seek Professional Support

Have you ever found yourself wondering whether what your child is going through is just a phase — or something that needs more than you can give on your own?

That question tends to show up quietly, often late at night, after a difficult day. Maybe your child cried again at the classroom door, and you walked away with that tight feeling in your chest. Maybe bedtime has turned into an hour of negotiations, one more glass of water, one more check of the hallway, one more promise that you'll stay close. Maybe your child has started turning down birthday parties, or falling apart over homework in a way that seems bigger than the task deserves. Or maybe the worry is quieter than that — a child who seems fine on the surface but asks the same anxious questions over and over, needing reassurance that never quite sticks.

These situations rarely arrive all at once. They build. First it's a few rough mornings, then a week of them. You adjust, you accommodate, you tell yourself it's normal, because much of it is. Childhood is full of fears and worries, and most of them loosen their grip with time, patience, and steady support from the adults around them. That's the ordinary work of growing up.

But there's a point where the ordinary work stops feeling like enough. And the confusing part is that no one hands you a clear signal for when that point arrives. There's no alarm that goes off. Instead, there's a slow accumulation of small moments that, added together, start to tell you something.

The signs that are easy to miss

The first thing to understand is that the signs are usually not dramatic. We tend to imagine that professional help becomes relevant only in obvious crisis — and of course, sometimes it is. But far more often, the signs are subtle and spread out over weeks and months, which is exactly why they're easy to dismiss.

One of the clearest signs is when the worry starts to shrink your child's world. A child who used to try new things begins to avoid them. Playdates get declined, clubs get quit, the walk to a friend's house becomes too much. It happens gradually, and each individual avoidance seems reasonable in the moment. But over time, the circle gets smaller. That shrinking is worth paying attention to, because avoidance tends to feed itself.

Another sign is when the fear stops responding to the support that usually helps. Every child has bad days that a hug and a calm conversation can turn around. But if you've been

patient and consistent, if you've offered reassurance and comfort and gentle encouragement for a stretch of weeks, and the worry seems just as strong as before — or stronger — that's information. It doesn't mean you've done something wrong. It means this particular worry may need a different kind of help than a parent can provide alone.

Then there's the question of daily life. Is your child still able to do the ordinary things — go to school, sleep, eat, play, connect with the people they love? When anxiety starts interfering with these basics regularly, not just on hard days but as a pattern, it deserves attention. A child who is losing sleep night after night, or whose school attendance is becoming a battle, or who has stopped eating properly, is telling you something through their behaviour.

And finally, look at the distress itself. There's a difference between a child who is uncomfortable and a child who is suffering. If the worry is causing real misery — tears that don't stop, physical complaints like stomach aches or headaches that show up around the same situations, a child who seems sad or withdrawn much of the time — that's not something to wait out indefinitely. Distress in a child is not a character flaw or a discipline problem. It's a signal.

When it repeats, not just happens

One difficult morning is a morning. A pattern is something else.

This is perhaps the most useful distinction to hold onto: it's not the intensity of any single moment that matters most, but whether the same difficulty keeps returning. A child who panics once before a school performance is having a very human experience. A child who panics every Sunday evening about the week ahead, week after week, is showing you a pattern. The first may need a listening ear and some reassurance. The second is asking for something more.

Patterns are worth noticing because they tell you that the worry has taken up residence rather than simply passing through. And when something has taken up residence, it rarely leaves on its own just because everyone is hoping it will. It tends to need to be addressed directly — sometimes by parents with good tools, and sometimes with the guidance of someone trained to help.

So the practical question isn't "is my child anxious?" Almost every child is, at some point. The better question is: has this been going on long enough, and strongly enough, that it's changing how my child lives?

The part where parents second-guess themselves

If you're reading this and recognising your own family, you may also be hearing a small voice telling you that seeking help would be an overreaction. That you should be able to handle this. That other parents seem to manage. That bringing in a professional would somehow label your child, or make the worry bigger than it is.

It's worth naming that voice directly, because it keeps a lot of families stuck. Wanting support is not a failure of parenting. It's the same instinct that makes you take your child to a doctor for a persistent cough — not because you've failed to keep them healthy, but because some things need the right expertise. Emotional and psychological difficulties are no different. Asking for help early is not an overreaction; it's often the most proportionate response there is.

There's also a quieter cost to waiting too long. The longer a child's world stays small, the harder it becomes to step back into it. Avoidance that starts as a small circle has a way of drawing itself tighter over time. Reaching out sooner rather than later is usually gentler on everyone.

None of this is about finding a reason to worry more. It's about trusting your own observations. You know your child better than anyone. If something has been off for a while — if the worry keeps returning, if it's interfering with ordinary life, if it doesn't soften with the support you've been giving — that's not you being anxious. That's you paying attention.

In the second half of this chapter, we'll look at what actually happens when you do reach out, and how to take that step in a way that feels manageable rather than overwhelming.

Reaching out sooner rather than later tends to make the whole thing smaller, not bigger.

One small step you can take today

You don't need a plan, a diagnosis, or a speech. You need one phone call or one email. That's the whole step.

Start with the person who already knows your child — your family doctor, your child's teacher, or the school counsellor. You don't have to arrive with a perfect description of the problem. A single sentence is enough: "I'm worried about how anxious my child has been, and I'd like to talk about what might help." That sentence opens a door, and the person on the other side is used to hearing it. If you'd rather not call, send a short message instead. The form of the contact doesn't matter; making it does.

Then keep a simple record, starting tonight. For a week or two, jot down one or two lines at the end of each day: what the hard moment was, when it happened, and how long it lasted. Nothing elaborate — a note on your phone is fine. This isn't busywork. When you do sit down with someone, these notes will tell the story far better than your memory will on a stressful day, and they'll help you spot the pattern you may only be sensing right now.

And keep the step going by lowering the bar for what counts as progress. You are not trying to solve the worry this week. You are trying to make contact and gather a little information. If the first call leads nowhere, try the next door. Persistence here looks less like determination and more like simple repetition: ask, wait, follow up, ask again.

Where people usually stumble

The first stumble is the waiting itself. You make the call, and then the appointment is three weeks away, and in those three weeks the worry seems to ease. Your child has a few good days, and you start to wonder whether you overreacted, whether you should cancel. This is extremely common, and it's worth deciding in advance what you'll do. A good rule: don't cancel because of a good week. The pattern is the reason you called, and one good week doesn't erase it. Keep the appointment, and if things truly have improved, say so when you get there. That's useful information too.

The second stumble is expecting the first conversation to feel like an answer. Often it isn't. The first meeting is usually about gathering information — yours and theirs — and it can feel slower and less decisive than you hoped. That's not a sign that it isn't working. It's how careful help begins. Give it a few sessions before you judge whether it's the right fit, and if something feels genuinely off — the approach, the fit, the way you're spoken to — you're allowed to say so, or to look elsewhere.

The third stumble is at home, after the appointment. You come back with good intentions and try to change everything at once, and within a week the whole plan has collapsed. Small and steady beats thorough and abandoned. Pick one thing — a calmer bedtime routine, a agreed signal your child can use when worry spikes, a shorter goodbye at the classroom door — and let that become normal before adding anything else.

As for how long change takes: honestly, longer than anyone wants. Improvements in childhood anxiety tend to arrive in small increments, with good weeks and bad weeks mixed together, rather than in a clean upward line. Give it weeks and months, not days, and judge progress by the direction of travel rather than by any single day.

A short closing summary

Seeking professional support is not a last resort, and it's not a verdict on your parenting. It's what you do when ordinary support has been steady and patient and the worry still won't loosen. The signs to watch are a shrinking world, fear that stops responding to comfort, daily life getting harder, real distress, and — above all — a pattern that keeps repeating. If you recognise your family in these pages, the next step is small: one call, one message, one short record of what you're seeing. That's enough to begin.

PRACTICE

1. Today, send one short message or make one call to your family doctor, your child's teacher, or the school counsellor: "I'm worried about how anxious my child has been — I'd like to talk about what might help."
2. For the next two weeks, write one or two lines each evening about the hardest moment of the day: what happened, when, how long it lasted.
3. Decide now that you won't cancel a first appointment just because of a good week — attend it and describe the pattern honestly.
4. After the first meeting, choose one small change to try at home and keep it in place for a month before adding another.

Further reading

- Charles H. Elliott, Ph.D., *Overcoming Anxiety for Dummies*, 2002 · ISBN 9781119998273
- China Martens, *The future generation*, 1990 · ISBN 9781629634500
- Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Essentials of educational psychology*, 2006 · ISBN 9780133018103
- Jessica Lahey, *The gift of failure*, 2015 · ISBN 9781780722450
- Joy Berry, *Separation*, 1984 · ISBN 9780516021317
- Judith Viorst, *The good-bye book*, 1988 · ISBN 9780689313080

— The End —