

Helping Your Child with Anxiety

Written by David Powlison. From *Zoe's Hiding Place: When you are Anxious* Edited by David Powlison and Illustrated by Joe Hox (New Growth Press: Greensboro, NC, 2018).

The best way to help your child is for you to know how God “comforts us in all our troubles so we can comfort others” (2 Corinthians 1:4). As you talk with your child about anxiety, ask the Lord to be teaching you at the same time how to trust him in a world of troubles. Then you can share with your child the comfort you receive. Here are some things to remember that will bring comfort to you and your child in the midst of fear and anxiety.

1. We have good reasons to be anxious and afraid.

Stress and anxiety are universal human struggles. We live in a broken world where things can and do go wrong. On our own we don't have the power to fix others, our world, or ourselves. Your children may not be able to articulate these truths, but they do feel them—just as you do. Jesus acknowledges this when he reminds his disciples (and us) that in this world we will have trouble (John 16:33).

2. The most frequent command in the Bible is “don't be afraid.”

God knows our human tendency to be fearful and he responds by telling us not to fear. This is not a command with a warning attached to disobeying it (like the Ten Commandments). It's a command with promises attached to it. It's those promises that you can remember and share with your child.

3. The Lord gives us better reasons for trusting him.

God, in his Word, gives us imperishable reasons (promises) for responding to the troubles of life with faith. You can learn to remember that God is near in the midst of trouble (Philippians 4:5-6). You can learn to remember that he is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1). You can teach your child to remember these things as well.

4. Help your child identify the source of anxiety.

Zoe's mom had “listening ears.” Just as God listens to our troubles, Zoe's mom listened and heard what Zoe was afraid of and understood how Zoe wanted to deal with her fears.

5. Remind your child that the Lord has listening ears.

Because the Lord is near, he is also listening to us. “I love the Lord because he hears my voice” (Psalm 116:1). Encourage your children to tell God specifically about the troubles that are filling their minds and hearts. Pray with and for them.

6. Remind your child that the Lord is speaking of them about their fears.

Think with your child about what God says to us when we are anxious. Remember with them that Jesus is with them and will never leave them (Hebrews 13:5). Perhaps you have some favorite Bible verses you can remind them of when they are anxious. Here are some of mine:

“The Lord is near. Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.” (Philippians 4:5-6).

“Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

“The Lord keeps you from all harm and watches over your life. The Lord keeps watch over you as you come and go, both now and forever” (Psalm 121:7-8).

“The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need” (Psalm 23:1).

7. Look for specific ways to help your child remember what God says to them when they are afraid.

Papa gave Zoe a verse to put into her pocket—a very concrete way for a child (or anyone!) to remember God’s promise of help in the midst of trouble. You can use the Bible verses at the end of the book as a way to help you and your child remember when you are anxious that the lord is near. Or think of other ways to help. Perhaps post a Bible Promise somewhere for your whole family to see or even memorizing a psalm together (Psalm 23 and 121 are short and full of comfort for worried children and adults).

8. Notice God’s world with your child.

Jesus encourages us to consider the beauty of the lilies and God’s care for even the smallest bird (Matthew 6: 25-33). As Zoe walked to school, she noticed God’s world around her. Being out in God’s world reminds us that God is bigger than us and cares for us.

9. Encourage your child to say “sorry” to God and others when appropriate.

Zoe struggled to listen. And when she didn’t listen, she got lost. She did need to say “sorry” to Miss Minnick. God is faithful to forgive all who say “sorry” (1 John 1:9). Remind your child that asking and receiving forgiveness is just an everyday part of life as God’s child.

10. Encourage your child to take one small step of faith and love.

For Zoe that was going on the trip to the museum even though she was afraid. What small, constructive thing might you encourage your child to do today?