

Helping Your Child with Anxiety

An Ericksonian Perspective for Parents

Brisbane Hypnosis Centre

A note before you begin

If you're reading this you've probably watched your child struggle with something that looks like anxiety — and found that the usual reassurances don't quite reach it. "There's nothing to worry about" may well be true, but it doesn't seem to help. This guide doesn't offer a cure or a programme, what we offer is a way of thinking about anxiety in children. Our work in our hypnotherapy practice draws on the teachings from the hypnosis and psychotherapeutic work of Milton Erickson, so we're sharing a few approaches drawn from Ericksonian hypnotherapy. In this guide are some ideas that might assist you and others to consider ways of responding to your child's worry, and hopefully in turn, how your child experiences their worry.

Who was Milton Erickson?

Milton Erickson, M.D., was a psychiatrist and hypnotherapist who spent his life studying how people change. He was particularly interested in the indirect routes to change: a story told sideways, a question that reframes an idea without being confronting, the gentle redirection of attention.

Erickson was a uniquely gifted communicator, and this went both ways: he listened just as well as he spoke. His communication methods have been studied and modelled widely, and have influenced many modern therapeutic practices, and theories of communication.

The so-called 'Ericksonian' approach is especially relevant to children, because children don't always respond well to being told what to think or feel. They respond to being met with curiosity and warmth — and to having their experience acknowledged before anything else is attempted.

You don't need a clinical background to apply Ericksonian thinking at home. Much of it is simply a way of being present with another person.

Understanding what anxiety is doing

Anxiety in children isn't a malfunction, nor is it a reflection of parenting. There isn't always a meaningful 'why', or originating event. It's a protection strategy that has become overextended. The nervous system is doing exactly what it's supposed to do — scanning for threat, preparing for action — but it's applied to situations where it isn't needed: school projects, social invitations, unfamiliar places, people, food, etcetera, etcetera.

One of the most useful beliefs that Erickson held was that symptoms and behaviours often have a positive intention behind them - we do what we do because we're trying to improve our experience in some way. So, in this way 'anxiety' is trying to keep your child safe. The problem isn't the intention — it's the calibration.

When we understand this, the temptation to fight anxiety or argue a child out of what they're experiencing tends to ease. We're not dealing with irrationality. We're dealing with a protection response that needs to learn it can relax.

What children respond to

Erickson noticed early in his career that children operate with a different relationship to imagination and reality than adults. For a child, a well-told story isn't just entertaining — it's *experience*. Modern neuroscience teaches us that the nervous system responds to imagined scenarios much as it responds to real ones, which is both the cause of many childhood fears and the key to addressing them.

Metaphor reaches places that direct conversation doesn't

The logic and reasoning capacity of an adult is utilising different 'hardware' to that which a child has. While a child may demonstrate the capacity to think logically and consider cause and effect, and engage in abstract thought, the part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) that allows us to effectively reason and problem-solve is not fully developed until we are around 25 years old.

If a child is afraid of something, talking directly about the fear can reinforce it — it keeps their attention focused on the problem. Conversely, a story about a character who faces something similar and finds a way through (a problem-solving metaphor) can create a resolution to a problem without triggering the same defences. We're not trying to distract, necessarily, but rather encourage the child to consider things in a different way.

Using metaphors in this way makes best use of the developed part of a child's brain, and the child's mind. It is a therapeutically useful way of engaging the imagination.

You don't have to be a therapist to tell a useful story. You just have to tell it with genuine curiosity about how it ends.

Children co-regulate with the adults around them

The nervous system of a child co-regulates ('syncs') with the adults who are close to them. A calm, grounded parent or caregiver communicates safety in a way no amount of verbal reassurance can fully replicate.

This is harder than it sounds, especially when your child's distress is activating your own. This is a normal, empathetic response when we love and care for someone - we feel what they feel. It's worth acknowledging that supporting an anxious child well sometimes means tending to your own nervous system first.

Questions invite participation; reassurance can close it down

Questions are a great way to explore what your child is feeling, and to help diffuse anxiousness. Questions invite. Consider: “What do you think would happen?” opens something; “I’m sure it will be fine” closes it.

Erickson was a skilled question-asker — not to interrogate, but to invite the person in front of him to discover something for themselves, rather than be told it.

With children, this can be as simple as asking about exceptions: “Is there ever a time when the worry is a bit smaller? What’s different then?”. You might be surprised at how this can lead to some meaningful resolution of the problem.

A few things worth trying

These aren’t techniques in a clinical sense. They’re ways of being with a child that are informed by Ericksonian thinking. Use what fits and leave what doesn’t.

The worry time experiment

Some children find it helpful to have a designated worry time — a short, specific window each day (ten minutes, perhaps before dinner) that is explicitly for worrying. Outside that window, when a worry comes up, the child can note it and save it for later.

This works on an Ericksonian principle: rather than fighting the worry (which amplifies it), you’re giving it a place. You’re not dismissing it — you’re containing it. Many children find that by the time worry time arrives, the worry has quietly reduced or doesn’t seem worth raising.

That discovery — that worries don’t always need immediate attention — is a useful one to make.

Noticing the body

Anxiety lives in the body before it reaches the mind. Children (and, indeed, adults) who learn to notice what anxiety feels like physically — the tightness, the quickened breathing, the unsettled stomach — develop a kind of early warning system that gives them more choice about what to do next.

You can help by asking about sensation rather than thought: “Where do you feel it? What does it feel like — tight, or fluttery, or something else?” This is a gentle introduction to the kind of somatic awareness that is central to many effective therapeutic approaches.

The helpful character

Erickson used what he called “inner resources” — the idea that people have within them the capacities they need, and that good therapy is often about accessing these rather than installing new resources.

With children, this translates well to a simple exercise: ask your child to think of a character — real or fictional, human or animal — who is particularly good at handling whatever your child finds difficult. Then ask: “What would [character] do here?” or “What would they say to you right now?”

This isn’t avoidance. It’s a way of accessing a perspective the child already has access to, in a form that feels natural and unthreatening.

Sleep and the imagination

Many anxious children find the transition to sleep difficult — it's a moment of reduced control, and the mind fills the space. Ericksonian approaches to sleep emphasise the use of gentle, absorbing imagery that gives the mind something pleasant to do. Not forced relaxation, which can paradoxically increase tension, but an invitation to curiosity.

Simple versions of this include: asking your child to imagine a favourite place in as much sensory detail as they can; telling a slow, meandering story with no particular destination; or asking them to count something pleasant and imaginary as they drift toward sleep.

When to seek professional support

This guide is written for parents navigating everyday childhood anxiety — the kind that most children experience to some degree at some point.

If anxiety is significantly interfering with your child's daily life — school attendance, friendships, eating, sleep over a sustained period — it's worth speaking with a professional who works specifically with children.

A skilled hypnotherapist trained in Ericksonian approaches can work with a child in ways that don't feel like therapy — through conversation, story, and imagination — which many children find more accessible than direct psychological work.

Brisbane Hypnosis Centre

We work with adults and young people aged 16 and over. For children under 16, we're happy to point you toward practitioners we trust.

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