

## **How to prepare your children to be safety conscious without making them completely paranoid.** By Liezel King

The child associates the family home as the only place which will keep them safe but the reality is that attacks and break ins occur on a daily basis and children are exposed to the possibility by the media or at school.

Parents need to establish what the children know about violence and how they interpret the messages from the media. This will help them explain what violence is and why a violent act has occurred. When the child asks if what he sees on TV will also happen to him or the family, parents should be honest and reassure the child that they will do everything in their power to protect the family. Implementing safety at home should be discussed with the child at their level of understanding. Rules regarding “do’s” and “don’ts” must be drawn up with the children.

It is also important that parents identify anxiety in their children.

### **Anxiety affects children in three ways:**

- Firstly, it’s experienced in the thoughts that they have. The child might have some thoughts that centre on some type of danger or threat.
- Secondly, anxiety is experienced physically. The child may complain about stomach aches, headaches, vomiting, diarrhoea or tiredness.
- Thirdly, anxiety affects children’s behaviour. When children are anxious, they fidget, pace, shake, cry or cling. In addition, anxiety might take on some form of avoidance, for example not wanting to sleep alone in their room.

Children also experience separation anxiety, where they fear being separated from their main caregiver. The child fears that something terrible

will either happen to the parent or the child while they are apart.

There are different ways in which parents can handle their children’s anxiety; some more effective than others. Methods that increase anxiety include: excessively reassuring the child, being too directive, permitting or encouraging avoidance, and becoming impatient with your child.

More useful methods for handling children’s anxiety include: not allowing avoidance, helping the child to independently manage his/her anxiety in a constructive manner, and reducing reassurance-seeking by ignoring this behaviour.

Steps which reduce anxiety include:

1. Summarize what your child has said. Check the accuracy of your understanding of the problem
2. Help the child to come up with their own suggestions for reducing anxiety.
3. Go through each strategy that the child suggests: the consequences and possible outcomes. The overall goal is to problem-solve with the child to find an appropriate solution.
4. Prompt the child to select the strategy that is most likely to result in a positive outcome.
5. Teach the child relaxation exercises.

### **References**

1. Helping your anxious child - A step-by-step guide for parents, Ronald M. Rapee, Ph. D., Susan H. Spencer, Ph.D., New Haringer Publications, INC, 2000.
2. Ten Talks Parents must have with their children about violence, Dominic Cappello, Hyperion Publications, 2000