

insights



Understanding your child's anxious behaviour using the ABC method

by Dr Jodi Richardson

When our children are suffering they turn to us for help. Never is this more true than when they're experiencing anxiety. The experience of it is awful and they want it stopped. Now. That's all we want too: to put an end to their fear, dread and worry. To help them feel calm, happy and playful again. But the contagious nature of anxiety means that while, as parents, we're helping our children in the midst of their turmoil, we can also struggle with anxiety of our own. All those stories begin to swirl around in our minds leaving us worrying about what it all means for our child's future happiness.

The more you understand about the events that trigger anxiety in your child and the way he or she behaves when feeling anxious, the better equipped you'll be to respond in a truly helpful way.

The fight, flight, freeze or freak out response

It's important to remember that all of our kids will experience anxiety at some time or another. It's a natural and protective reaction to the anticipation of danger or discomfort, a deeply ingrained instinctive response that gears people up, big and small, to **fight** for their life, or run for it (**flight**). As well as the 'fight or flight' response, it's also been called the 'fight, flight, freeze or freak out' response. No argument there!

In the majority of cases where kids experience anxiety (which may even be trepidation or nervousness) – such as when faced with a maths test or a presentation in front of the class – when the 'danger' passes the anxiety passes too.

However there are kids who experience debilitating anxiety on a more regular basis: anxiety that interferes with their ability to function, participate in life and enjoy being a kid. In these cases it's important to develop a deeper understanding of the events that happen before and after the anxiety is displayed. The ABC anxiety technique is an invaluable tool used by psychologists when looking at behaviour patterns.

You can use it too.

The ABC technique

Anxiety can be thought of as a sequence of events, beginning with a triggering event that is called the **Activator**. The Activator is present before your child becomes anxious and fearful. It isn't always one thing but can be a set of circumstances or factors like tiredness and hunger. Children won't always be aware of what's triggered their anxiety but as you begin to note down the ABC's, you'll establish some patterns that will help you both.

The activator triggers your child's anxious Behaviour. Now's about the time you might form a picture in your mind of what you witness when your little one is anxious. You'll see a whole bunch of behaviours including avoidance, anger, fear and distress, but what you won't necessarily see are the 'private' behaviours of your child such as their thoughts and feelings. Understanding these is really insightful.

Lastly, your little one's anxiety will naturally bring about a reaction from others. This can be from you, other family members, your child's friends and/or their teacher, depending on where they are. These reactions are the last part of your new tool, termed Consequences. Understanding what happens in response to your child's anxiety is important, again, for understanding patterns that have built up over time.

Start by creating a table (anyway you like) similar to the one below but include more rows in yours.

Find a quiet few minutes and begin by thinking about what happens when your child becomes anxious. Describe anxious behaviours in detail in the middle column. These could be the things you witness such as crying, pacing, avoidance, clinging, etc. plus any thoughts or feelings your child has shared with you.

Let's say for example that thunderstorms trigger anxiety in your child. Their behaviour might include fear, crying, an upset tummy and hiding away from the noise. Find a quiet few minutes and begin by thinking about what happens when your child becomes anxious. Describe anxious behaviours in detail in the middle column. These could be the things you witness such as crying, pacing, avoidance, clinging, etc. plus any thoughts or feelings your child has shared with you.

At first glance the activator might seem obvious: thunder and lightning in this example. But perhaps the anxiety is triggered earlier than that. Could it begin with overhearing the storm forecast on the news or the heavy rain preceding the storm? Finally, the Consequences column is to note what happens immediately after the anxious behaviour. What happens, and how everyone feels.

Go through this same process with the other anxious behaviours you listed. There are some examples on the following page.

The ABC exercise enables you to contemplate your child's anxious behaviours and the circumstances around them including, importantly, when you're not actually in the thick of it. My guess is that you're already pretty clear about the behaviours, but after doing this exercise you'll be armed with details of the triggers (Activators) and outcomes (Consequences) as well. Combined, this understanding will give you insights into how anxiety unfolds for your child, an opportunity to reflect on your own responses to anxious behaviour, and where there might be opportunities for helpful change.



If at any time you're at all concerned about your little one, please consult with your GP to seek advice and reassurance.

Example ABC table and anxious behaviours

Activators	Behaviours	Consequences
Thunderstorm forecast	Upset tummy, cries and hides in bedroom, won't get ready for school	Repeated reassurance, gently encouraging to get uniform on and have breakfast. Only makes things worse. Late for school, again. Feeling frustrated.
Teacher announces upcoming test	Irritable, keeps repeating "I'm going to fail", headache	Suggested making a plan to prepare for test, rejected. Consoling with arm around her telling her it's going to be okay. Both feeling really upset.



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