

Words That Help: Communicating with Anxious Children

Gentle ways to connect, soothe, and support

When a child is anxious, it can feel like there's a right thing to say and that we're somehow getting it wrong. But the truth is, children don't need perfect words. They need calm, kindness, and the sense that we're truly with them.

This resource is here to help. The scripts and suggestions aren't rules, they're suggested starting points. You might adapt them, borrow the tone, or just let them remind you that **connection is more powerful than correction**.

Above all, this is about helping anxious children feel safe enough to trust, talk, and thrive; in their own time, and in their own way.

1. School-Based Anxiety

Many children experience school as overwhelming, socially, sensory-wise, or academically. They may not be able to explain why, and pushing them can heighten distress. Our role is to validate their experience and help make school feel safer.

Helpful:

- "It makes sense that school feels hard right now. You're not in trouble."
Why it helps: Normalises their feelings and removes the fear of punishment.
- "Want to tell me the tricky bit, or the okay bit?"
Why it helps: Offers choice and breaks the day down into manageable parts.
- "If you had a magic wand, what would tomorrow at school look like?"
Why it helps: Reveals hopes and pain points in a low-pressure way.
- "Would you rather write, draw or talk about it?"
Why it helps: Offers autonomy and reduces pressure to verbalise feelings.

Less helpful:

- "Just try your best." → *May feel invalidating if they already are.*
- "You'll be fine once you're there." → *Ignores real fear and dismisses lived experience.*

2. Food and Mealtimes

Food-related anxiety often links to sensory sensitivities, trauma, or control needs. Power struggles at mealtimes tend to escalate anxiety and shame. Gentle curiosity works better than coercion.

Helpful:

- "You don't have to eat it all, let's find something that feels okay."
Why it helps: Removes pressure and promotes collaboration.
- "Does the texture or smell bother you?"
Why it helps: Opens up useful insight without judgement.
- "How about we make a 'try plate' together?"
Why it helps: Encourages exploration without demands.

Less helpful:

- “You’ll sit there until it’s gone.” → *Increases anxiety, removes autonomy.*
- “Other kids would be grateful for this.” → *Introduces guilt and disconnects from the child’s needs.*

3. Shutdowns and Situational Mutism

In moments of shutdown, many children can’t speak (not won’t speak). This isn’t defiance, it’s a freeze response. Respecting this builds trust; pushing for speech does the opposite.

Helpful:

- “You don’t have to talk. I’m still here with you.”
Why it helps: Reassures and removes pressure.
- “Want to text me, write it down, or just sit together?”
Why it helps: Offers alternatives and shows flexibility.
- “Thumbs up for yes, thumbs down for no?”
Why it helps: Provides accessible communication.

Less helpful:

- “Stop being rude.” → *Misinterprets fear as bad behaviour.*
- “Use your words.” → *Assumes choice and increases pressure.*

4. Friendship Wobbles

Friendships can feel overwhelming, especially for neurodivergent or anxious children. They may mask pain or lash out. Gentle listening helps build self-awareness and social confidence.

Helpful:

- “Want me to just listen, or help you figure it out?”
Why it helps: Respects their need and offers choice.
- “I’ve felt like that before too. It can be really lonely.”
Why it helps: Normalises big emotions and reduces shame.
- “Shall we practice what you want to say, or write a message together?”
Why it helps: Builds skills in low-pressure ways.

Less helpful:

- “Just go and play with someone else.” → *Minimises their pain.*
- “You’re too sensitive.” → *Invalidates feelings and discourages sharing.*

5. Overwhelm and Meltdowns

Meltdowns are often a build-up of stress, not naughtiness. In these moments, children need co-regulation and calm, not correction.

Helpful:

- “I can see this is too much. Let’s take a break together.”
Why it helps: Names the overwhelm without blame.
- “Would you like to breathe together, or sit in your calm corner?”
Why it helps: Offers coping strategies and choice.
- “We don’t have to talk about this now. We can come back to it.”
Why it helps: Removes pressure and models emotional safety.

Less helpful:

- “Calm down!” → *Often escalates things - it’s a command, not a strategy.*
- “You’re being ridiculous.” → *Shames them and erodes trust.*

6. Repairing After a Rupture

Repairing after conflict or overwhelm models emotional resilience. It teaches kids that relationships can survive hard moments.

Helpful:

- “I’m sorry I didn’t get it right earlier. You matter to me.”
Why it helps: Models accountability and care.
- “I got it wrong, can we try again together?”
Why it helps: Invites collaboration and repair.
- “What should we do next time this happens?”
Why it helps: Builds problem-solving together.

Less helpful:

- “You always do this.” → *Locks them into a negative identity.*
- “That wasn’t that bad.” → *Invalidates their lived experience.*

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If you’ve read this far, you’re already doing something that matters: you’re learning how to listen better, speak more gently, and show up with love, especially when it’s hard.

You won’t always get it right. None of us do. But every time you choose curiosity over control, or compassion over correction, you’re showing a child that they’re safe with you.

And that safety? That’s where everything starts.

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