

Top Tips for Helping Kids with OCD

Learn More about OCD

OCD is a complex anxiety disorder, knowing more about it and how it works will help you to help your child. 'Helping Your Child with OCD: A Workbook for Parents' by Lee Fitzgibbons and Cherlene Pedrick; 'What To Do When Your Brain Gets Stuck' by Dawn Huebner; and 'Talking Back to OCD: The Program That Helps Kids and Teens Say "No Way" and Parents Say "Way to Go"' by John March are great resources for helping children and adolescents with OCD.

Know Your Child's Rituals

Ask your child to help you be a detective to find out how the OCD is bossing them around. Rituals might be actions (e.g. hand washing, tapping objects a certain number of times) or thoughts (e.g. saying a certain word in my head, counting to 10). Adolescents may prefer to monitor their rituals independently. If you're unsure if something your child does is OCD, ask them.

Help Your Child Reduce Their Rituals

It feels like going along with the OCD and performing rituals will stop bad things from happening or make it feel right, but performing rituals actually stops your child from learning that their fears won't come true, even if they don't do what the OCD tells them to. Resisting the OCD will help your child to overcome it.

Ask your child to rate how hard it will be to stop doing each of their rituals and start with the ritual that will be easiest to change. You're aiming to not perform the ritual at all but this may be too hard at first, instead try: gradually reducing the amount of time your child can use to perform the ritual, changing the order of the ritual, or gradually delaying the ritual. With repeated practice your child's anxiety should lessen and it should take less time for their anxiety to pass.

Encourage Your Child to Test It Out

Kids perform rituals because they fear that something bad will happen if they don't or because if they don't, it doesn't feel "right". Encourage your child to experiment and see what happens if they don't perform their ritual. As a general rule, it's usually best to do this with the rituals your child feels is easiest to refrain from first. Doing this will help to build evidence that the OCD is lying (i.e. feared outcomes don't occur even if you don't do what the OCD tells you to do).

Avoid Being Part of Your Child's Rituals

When you see your child is struggling it can be tempting to help them with their rituals to minimise their distress or to speed things up. This might help at the time, but aiding will actually worsen your child's anxiety in the longer-term. When you help your child they indirectly learn that you also think it's important to do what the OCD says.

OCD

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder or OCD is an anxiety disorder associated with intrusive thoughts or mental images (obsessions) and repetitive rituals (compulsions).

Obsessions are intrusive and unwanted thoughts about negative or catastrophic events. Kids with OCD get 'stuck' on obsessions and find it hard to stop their worry. Common obsessions in kids are:

- Thoughts about illness or germs
- Excessive worry about the death of a family member
- Worry about doing something wrong and getting in trouble
- Excessive worry about locks and safety
- Thoughts about choking, vomiting, or not being able to breath

Obsessions are distressing and the anxiety they cause makes kids feel that they have to perform repetitive rituals (compulsions) to stop the anxiety or to prevent bad things from happening. OCD can manifest in a variety of different ways, but common compulsions are:

- Hand washing
- Having to repeat an action a certain number of times
- Needing things in a specific order
- Needing to check things over and over

Use these tips to help your child manage their OCD, but also speak to your GP about a referral to a child clinical psychologist.