

Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog

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When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning parents can fall into a negative cycle and, not wanting a child to suffer, actually exacerbate the youngster's anxiety. It happens when parents, anticipating a child's fears, try to protect her from them. Here are pointers for helping children escape the cycle of anxiety.

1. The goal is not to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.

None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety is not to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It is to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they are anxious. And as a byproduct of that, the anxiety will decrease or fall away over time.

2. Express positive—but realistic—expectations.

You cannot promise a child that his fears are unrealistic—that he will not fail a test, that he will have fun ice skating, or that another child will not laugh at him during show & tell. But you can express confidence that he is going to be okay, he will be able to manage it, and that, as he faces his fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives him confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you are not going to ask him to do something he cannot manage.

You are in the right place for your child's social, emotional, and behavioral health. Request a telehealth appointment.

3. Respect her feelings, but do not empower them.

It is important to understand that validation does not always mean agreement. So, if a child is terrified about going to the doctor because she is due for a shot, you do not want to belittle her fears, but you also do not want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic, help her understand what she is anxious about, and encourage her to feel that she can face her fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

4. Do not ask leading questions.

Encourage your child to talk about his feelings, but try not to ask leading questions— "Are you anxious about the big test? Are you worried about the science fair?" To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: "How are you feeling about the science fair?"

5. Do not reinforce the child's fears.

What you do not want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: "Maybe this is something that you should be afraid of." Let's say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time she is around a dog, you might be anxious about how she will respond, and you might unintentionally send a message that she should, indeed, be worried.

6. Encourage the child to tolerate her anxiety.

Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what he wants or needs to do. It is really encouraging him to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the “habituation curve”—it will drop over time as he continues to have contact with the stressor. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that is how we get over our fears.

7. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.

When we are afraid of something, the hardest time is really before we do it. So, another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory period. If a child is nervous about going to a doctor’s appointment, you do not want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go; that is likely to get your child more keyed up. So just try to shorten that period to a minimum.

8. Think things through with the child.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child’s fear came true—how would she handle it? A child who is anxious about separating from her parents might worry about what would happen if they did not come to pick her up. So, we talk about that. If your mom does not come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? “Well, I would tell the coach my mom’s not here.” And what do you think the coach would do? “Well, he would call my mom. Or he would wait with me.” A child who is afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick her up can have a code word from her parents that anyone they sent would know. For some kids, having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

9. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

There are multiple ways you can help kids manage anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Kids are perceptive, and they are going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you cannot handle the stress or the anxiety. I am not saying to pretend that you do not have stress and anxiety, but let kids hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.

Editor’s Note: The Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog will be distributed and posted weekly.
Always remember – **CARPE DIEM – SEIZE THE DAY!**

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