# Helping the anxious child: Supporting parents in helping their children

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## Fear and anxiety: Emotions essential for survival

- Everyone has the emotions at times.
- Signal us to be careful.
- Help us to stay safe.
- Most children and adults have mild fear or anxiety at times.
- The emotions tend to pass quickly once the threat has passed.
- Some children and adults have stronger fear and anxiety that happen more often and last longer.
- For these people, fear and anxiety may get in the way of normal activities.

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## Fear: The Fight, Flight, or Freeze Response

- Fight: We take actions to protect ourselves. We fight for our survival. Your child may fight to escape when he is in the doctor's office for a vaccination.
- Flight: Your child tries to leave the situation to get back to a safe place. If you are out for a walk and your child sees a big dog, she may rush back to be close to your side and may even ask to be picked up.
- Freeze: Your child may stay close to you and stay very still in order not to attract attention. (Your child may freeze when you go into a new situation where other children are playing together).

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## Questions

Does anxiety cause some difficulty for a young person you know well?

What challenges does this cause for the young person in the family or school?

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## Common Patterns of Anxiety

- Separation anxiety
- Specific fears – dogs
- Social anxiety – extreme shyness
- Generalized anxiety – frequent worries
- Panic attacks
- Selective mutism
- School refusal

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## Separation Anxiety

- High level of anxiety concerning separation from parents or home.
  ◦ upset when separation occurs
  ◦ worry about harm coming to self or parent
  ◦ reluctance to leave home, be alone or go to sleep alone because of fear of separation
  ◦ physical symptoms (for example, headaches, upset stomach) when anxious

## Social Anxiety (Excessive Shyness)

- Excessive or unrealistic fear of social situations.
- Worry about embarrassment
- Hates to be the centre of attention.
- Difficulty joining other children in play.
- May be shy with children or adults or both

## Specific Fear or Phobia

- Excessive fear of an object or situation
- Common fears: animals, insects, storms, dark, heights, throwing up
- Other phobias seen in young children: avoidance of loud sounds or costumed characters

## Generalized Anxiety

- Excessive worry about a number of everyday, ordinary experiences or activities.
- Often accompanied by physical symptoms.
- Family members might call this child a "worry wart"
- Common worries for children – not doing well in school, having problems with friends, getting sick, crime, disasters, getting lost, something bad happening to parents

## Common Patterns of Anxiety (2)

- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Illness anxiety disorder
- Related problem: School refusal
- All of the anxiety problems are likely more prevalent in children with other developmental problems such as autism spectrum disorders

## Post-traumatic Stress

- Occurs after a traumatic event to which the child responds with intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Children may re-live the event in memory, avoid reminders of the event, and experience emotional numbing and symptoms of increased arousal
- Examples – car accident, bad experience at the hospital, fire in the home, burglar, witnessing upsetting events
- Milder version may happen with upsetting events such as throwing up at school

## Obsessive-compulsive Behaviour

- Presence of obsessions: recurrent, unwanted and intrusive thoughts, images, or urges that cause marked anxiety
- And/or compulsions: repetitive behaviors or mental acts that are performed to reduce the anxiety generated by obsessions
- Examples: excessive checking or hand washing

## Other Important Conditions

- Often associated with anxiety disorders

  ◦ School refusal – not a separate anxiety disorder but many of the children with this problem have an anxiety disorder

  ◦ Selective mutism – now listed as a separate anxiety disorder

## Mental Health Problems Are Very Common in Childhood

- 41% will have a problem at some point in childhood
- 22% (1 in 5) will have a severe problem
- More common than most other health problems
- No evidence that they are more common now than they were in the past

## Common Problems in Childhood

| Problem | Present at some time | Severe at some time | Average age when started |
|---|---|---|---|
| Anxiety | 32% | 8% | Age 6 |
| Behaviour (include ADD) | 19% | 9% | Age 11 |
| Depression | 14% | 11% | Age 13 |
| Substance | 11% | | Age 15 |

## Why are excessive shyness or fearfulness important in childhood?

Higher risk in later life of:
- academic difficulties
- anxiety as a teenager and adult
- depression
- substance use (cigarettes, alcohol, other)

## Good News

- Help early in life reduces problems later in life
- The sooner the help comes along the better
- Parents are very motivated to help with the problem
- Many of the types of help that are most effective can be provided by parents

## What are the causes of anxiety disorders?

- Biological/genetic factors?
- Adverse experiences during childhood?
- Life stress close to the time when the problem starts?
- Conditioning or learning?

## What things have changed dramatically for children and families in last 100 years?
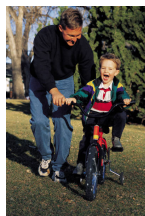
- More dangerous world?
- More bullying?

## Some of the changes

- Smaller family size
- Fewer children per street
- Children attend more diverse schools
- Child care before and after school
- TV, computer and games competing for children's time
- Dramatically decreased activity

## Parents Can Do A Great Deal To Help Their Child Overcome Common Problems In Childhood

- Parents know their children better than anyone else ≈ they are the earliest teachers of their children

- Parents can (AND DO) teach their children a variety of coping skills and strategies



## Teachers See Many Students Each Year and Can Recognize Children Experiencing Problems

- Parents have fewer reference points
- Teachers can bring important problems to the attention of parents
- Especially good opportunities to observe social anxiety/shyness and friendship issues.
- Helpful in each situation to emphasize both strengths and weaknesses.

## Challenge of the anxious child at school

- The child may be very quiet and cooperative
- Other children with more visible activities may demand more attention
- They may fly under the radar and no one notices the challenges they are facing

## Advantages of parents as the change agents in helping with anxiety

- The approach can be applied at a much younger age than child-focused treatment – e.g. 3,4,5 years
- A therapist could spend 1 hour a week with a child, parents spend many more hours of course
- Parents have more control of the environment
- Works well with children with developmental disabilities also
- Parents are more likely to remember and implement effective strategies in the years after intervention is completed.
- How well does a 11 year old implement a skill learned at age 9?

## Application in our clinical service

- Ages 3 to 12 or 13 – for most referrals intervention focuses on parents
- Ages 15 intervention focuses on the child but there may be involvement by the parents.
- 12 to 14 – depends on the situation and the motivation and skills of the child

## Challenge in providing psychosocial treatments

- There will never be enough trained professionals to meet the needs of the many families and children who would benefit from treatment
- ALTERNATIVES
  - Large group interventions
  - Interventions delivered through self-help books
  - Web-based interventions

## Web-based program for parents of anxious children

**Coaching for Confidence** — Helping Parents Help Their Children

🏠 Home   📄 Worksheets   ✉ Messages   💬 Discussion

### Home

**Messages**

There are no messages.

**Units**

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Start Here | Introduction to the Program | Weekly Check-In | Activities | |
| Understanding Anxiety | Introduction | Three Systems | Feedback | Worksheet |
| Anxiety Patterns | Problem Anxiety | | Feedback | |
| Overcoming Anxiety | Overcoming Anxiety Steps | | Feedback | |
| Worries | Introduction | Realistic Thinking Steps | Anxious Thinking | Feedback |
| Problem Solving | Introduction | Problem Solving Steps | Activities | Feedback |
| Reassurance Seeking | Introduction | Reduce Reassurance Steps | Activities | Feedback |
| Motivating Your Child | Introduction | Rewards Steps | Problem Solving | Feedback / Worksheet |
| Facing Fears | Principles | Facing Fears | Activities | Feedback / Worksheet |
| Encouraging Cooperation | Introduction | Steps | Activities | Feedback |

**Optional**

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Risk Factors | Introduction | | Feedback | |
| Screen time | Introduction | Problem Solving | Activities | Feedback |
| Bedtime Battles | Introduction | Bedtime Strategies | Activities | Feedback / Worksheet |
| Friendships | Introduction | Friendship Strategies | Activities | Feedback |
| Handling Intense Emotions | Introduction | Coping Steps | Activities | Feedback |

## Overcoming problems with anxiety

## Five Key Steps In Overcoming Anxiety Problems

▸ Step 1. Understanding and accepting the child's anxiety
▸ Step 2. Observing the pattern of anxiety
▸ **Step 3. Helping the child in facing fears**
▸ Step 4. Helping the child to think realistically about feared situations
▸ Step 5. Problem solving with the child

## Step 1. Understanding and accepting the child's anxiety

▸ Understand how common these problems are
▸ Your patience and determination are very helpful in managing these challenges
▸ Acceptance of emotions is important for children also – adults do not have to take away the child's distress

## Acceptance can be challenging for us as adults

▸ We see the child missing opportunities
▸ Avoidance is a core response to anxiety and this can make things inconvenient for everyone around
▸ The child's response to the anxiety can produce frustration and anger in others

## Step 2. Observing the child's pattern of anxiety

▸ Talk to adults who are close to the child about the patterns of anxiety
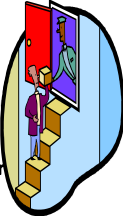▸ Your observations will help in developing a realistic plan

## Step 3. Helping the child in facing fears

- Facing your fear is the most important step in overcoming anxiety
- Repeated practice is the most important aspect
- People sometimes miss the importance of repeated practice
- Think about learning how to swim, learning how to keyboard

## Breaking down difficult tasks into smaller steps

▸ Break down a complicated task into smaller steps and even into component tasks
▸ Start with shorter time periods but work as soon as possible to longer time periods – effectiveness of practice depends on the time involved – more time – more results
▸ Having a support person close by often helps at first
▸ The more frequent the practice the better

## Step Plan Applied to a Fear of Public Speaking

Step ↑

7. Presents speech in front of class
6. Presents speech to close group of friends
5. Presents speech to a friend
4. Presents speech to the entire family
3. Presents speech to mother/father
2. Writes a speech and reads it in front of mirror
1. Reads a short story to mother/father

Step

Remember SMALL Steps!!

## Using praise and using rewards

‣ Children are generally very responsive to attention and praise from their parents and teachers. This is the most important reward for them.
‣ For difficult areas where a lot of practice is required it is often very helpful to have some additional reward beyond praise and attention to support the development of a new or difficult skill.
‣ Small activity rewards are the best.

## Examples

‣ Separation anxiety:
  ◦ Difficulty playing in the basement
  ◦ Difficulty staying with someone other than parent at home
  ◦ Difficulty going to play with a friend at their home.
  ◦ Difficulty with sleeping away from home

## Social anxiety

‣ Difficulty with speaking to relatives
‣ Difficulty speaking to adults visiting
‣ Difficulty speaking to child visiting

## Developing self reliance and age appropriate independence

‣ Problem solving skills
‣ Age appropriate supervision is important
‣ Use of public transit
‣ Traveling to and from activities

## Step 4. Helping the child to think realistically about feared situations

‣ Children who are anxious tend to make two errors in their thinking:

  ◦ They _overestimate_ how likely it is that an unpleasant event will happen

  ◦ They _overestimate_ how bad the consequences will be if the event does happen

## Excessive Reassurance Seeking Is Common

- What if you come late to pick me up at school?
- What if we have a tornado?
- What if Mom gets sick or dies?
- What if someone teases me?
- What if my friends don't like me?

## Step 5. Problem solving with the child

- **Children who Learn to Solve Problems:**
  - Realize that they have options
  - Develop confidence in themselves
  - Become more capable people
  - Learn to develop emotional self-control

## Steps to Solving Problems

- **Step 1: What is the problem?**
- **Step 2: How big a problem is it?**
- **Step 3: What could you do?**
- **Step 4: What would you like to try doing?**
- **Step 5: How well did the solution work?**

## Problem Solving As An Antidote To Reassurance Seeking

- What if Mom comes late to pick you up?
  - Not helpful to provide reassurance about this over and over
  - Mom probably will come late some time
  - What could you do if Mom comes late?
  - If the child does not know ask them to take some time to think about it.
  - Brainstorm with them about a plan.
  - Practice a plan.

## Public speaking at school

- Perhaps the most common fear in adults. Limits people's progress socially and in careers
- School is one of the key opportunities children have to learn public speaking – starts with show and tell in the early years
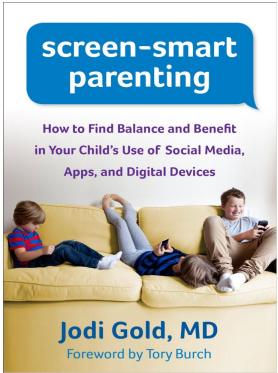- Some education programs provide great grounding in this.

## Managing Screen Time

- Keep screens in public areas of your home:
- Turn all devices off (including your own!) at least 30 minutes before bedtime
- 1 to 2 hours on weekdays max; none for very young children
- 2 hours a day or so on weekends max
- Screen time interferes with reading, physical activity, time with friends, learning practical skills

## n time in the home

* On average, how much screen time does your child/teen spend daily?

* Are there days of the week when there is markedly more screen time use?

* On average, how much screen time do you spend daily?

* Are there days of the week when you have markedly more screen time for yourself?

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## screen-smart parenting

How to Find Balance and Benefit in Your Child's Use of Social Media, Apps, and Digital Devices

**Jodi Gold, MD**

Foreword by Tory Burch

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## Parents have an important role in helping children develop friendship skills

▸ Encouraging friendship activities
▸ "Play dates" for younger children
▸ Controlling the amount of time spent in solitary activities with TV or computer.
▸ Creating incentives for activities with friends. Incentives for including a friend in family activities.
▸ Setting a good example with friendship in your life.

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## Resources for parents

▸ Book list of high quality books for parents
▸ Websites for parents
  ◦ www.anxietybc.com/parent/index.php
  ◦ copingcatparents.com/Information_Resources
    · Cost of web-based program $US 125 for one year access