

Being the Most Effective Parent: Strategies for Managing Your Feelings

By Tamar Chansky, Ph.D.

Director, Children's Center for OCD and Anxiety, Plymouth Meeting, PA

www.worrywisekids.org / www.tamarchansky.com

Anxious kids have mixed feelings about their fears—they don't like them, but they are afraid to change. Parents can have mixed feelings too— fear, anger, frustration and of course love and compassion. Keeping track of your own emotions will ensure that they don't undermine the clear message to your child: *you can do this, I will help*. Kids won't have to feel burdened that you are upset for them; they won't have to protest because you're angry at them. The road to recovery will open up unencumbered. In this newsletter, we look at how to identify and manage some common parental reactions to children's fears.

Your Fear: The “Scariest” Child is the Scariest Child

Parenting an anxious child can feel like living between a rock and a hard place. You don't want to force your child to do things that are uncomfortable, but seeing them miss out on important events feels no better. When trying to figure out your stance, ask yourself: Am I protecting my child, or preventing her from developing her own protection? At a certain point your fear of your child's reactions may make you hold back. However inadvertent, protecting your child from something that is difficult for him or her begins to register as a vote for the wrong team. Rather than helping your child feel safe, your reassurances and participation in avoidance becomes an endorsement that the situation is too dangerous for them to handle, or that they are simply not capable enough. These are not the messages you want to send.

Admitting that your child's fears frighten you is an important step in changing that situation. We've all been frightened of our child's fears. We don't understand them or their intensity, we can't offer them a good solution, and often we ourselves start to feel very overwhelmed in our own way. Just like our kids, we get stuck. In the heat of the moment this can be tormenting. You know you are the adult, the one who should be able to solve this, but you can't, and over time this can become debilitating. One couple

described their life as being in worry jail, the warden none other than their 7 year old son who tracked their every move, especially at bedtime, when no conversation, no footstep down the hall, no flick of a light switch went unnoticed. They couldn't go downstairs, talk on the phone, even take a shower until hours later, when exhausted from his eagle eye watch, the warden would finally fall asleep after 11:00. What was holding them back? They were afraid that they being firm was being mean to their child and that they would be bad parents, or worse, cause their child to have a breakdown if they were to set some limits.

When you're facing your own fears, ask yourself the following questions:

- What am I picturing will happen if my child gets upset?
- Instead of thinking of the worst thing that could possibly happen, what do I truly believe will happen?
- What are some situations that I have been firm where my child has been able to adapt?
- What are my child's strengths? How can I bring that picture to mind for both of us?

Your Anger and Resentment: Normal Reactions to Feeling Stuck by Proxy

Anger is a sign that something needs to change. It's a normal reaction to being constrained in some way, and there's no question that when you have an anxious child in your bed, or interrogating you for hours every night about whether they will throw up, even the most loving parent would and should feel some anger about that situation. It's what you do with that anger that makes it helpful or disastrous. Don't unleash it on your child— remember they are doing the best they can. Be patient, but not so patient that you're supporting your child's avoidance. Take your anger as a sign that a) you may need to re-evaluate how well your plan is for addressing the problem, and b) you need a break to get perspective, whether that's for a few minutes a night, or a weekend. The lesson here is that when you hang in when you burnt out, it's the same as when your child who insists on hammering away at a math problem they can't get, won't heed *your* advice to just walk away for a minute till they've calmed down. A double standard will not do

here. When you are feeling angry at the limitations on your life caused by your child's anxiety ask yourself:

- What am I really angry about?
- Do I feel that my child isn't trying, or is s/he doing the best s/he can?
- Am I angry at myself because I've been afraid to work on things?
- Am I angry because I'm tired and need a break?
- Am I getting the support I need?
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Take Care of Yourself: It's Your Job

In my practice, I have seen hundreds of parents who have endured countless sleepless nights and have been beyond reproach in their loyal support of their children, but are depleted, haggard, and feel terribly responsible and guilty that they can't leave their children even for an evening. Let this be a blanket permission and prescription: If you don't take care of yourself, you really can't be there for your kids. It's easy to lose the sense that you *have* been stellar parents if you're thinking, "if I was a good parent, I could take this away from my child."

Just because we can't take away our children's pain doesn't mean that we are not contributing to their wellbeing. In order to do so, you have to take care of yourself. It's not a luxury, it is basic maintenance, like changing the oil filter on your car every 3000 miles. Yes your car will run if you don't do that, but it won't run well and eventually it mucks up the whole system. Train yourself to put your feelings of guilt aside and just make the call to the sitter, draw a bath, hide with a good book, or take the dog for a walk. The world will turn, and you will work better when you return. Just do it.

To ease your departure, don't suggest a problem. Some parents will leave a thread hanging on departure, which only tugs at a child's precarious sense of confidence that they can do the challenge. Saying things like, "are you sure you'll be ok today?" or "You can always call if you need me" may be supportive statements in many instances, but for an anxious child will open a door of doubt. Try to make a clean break, without being overly cheery, that would be insensitive—and if your child is struggling, be

confident, steady, and no strings attached, tell them to have a good day, go get em, see you tonight...”

Watch Your Own Reactions

Whether we are talking about anger or fear, often anxious kids can read their parents like a book. After all, most anxious children are wired to attend to the smallest details, the slightest hint of danger, so reading the expression on a parent’s face is a focus. Though anxious children may be good at picking up subtle expressions, they may not be so good at accurately interpreting those expressions and often may negatively distort the meaning of a sigh. Below are some suggestions for keeping your reactions helpful rather than adding them to the list of concerns your child has.

Not Overreacting

Be empathic, but be careful not to buy into the anxiety’s perspective on the situation (i.e., that it’s impossible.) What may feel like *protecting* your child from a difficult situation is actually *preventing* her from learning the essential life skill that she can manage her anxiety a little at a time. If your child is upset about going to school, if you lose your footing in reality and think that it is too hard, anxiety will have won the tug of war against both of you and no one will be rooting for your child winning and overcoming the anxiety. Listen to the feelings, but help your child get to the facts.

Being a Good Soother

There is a fine line between soothing and stirring. When a child is upset, listening to them, comforting them, and reflecting their distress without adding to it is soothing. It gives kids the confidence that they are understood, that their parents respond to their cues and that they can be soothed. Stirring is what happens when a child is upset and parents “lead the witness.” Look at the following example:

Missy is invited to go to a friend's house; she's not always comfortable going to stay with friends and prefers them to come to her house. Tearfully she asks her mom what she should do,

Soothing: I know part of you wants to go, because Liz is your good friend and you know that you could have fun, but you're working on getting comfortable at her house. How could we make this work? What do you think would be hard, what could make it easier?

Stirring: If you don't want to go you don't have to, she can come here. Besides, it's raining and I don't like going out in the rain, it's so dreary.

In the first approach, Missy's problem is taken seriously, but so is the complexity of it, that part of the reason she is distressed is that she *wants* to go, even though it might be tough. Her mom validates why, but gives her options on how to work on it. In the second scenario, an "out" is given right away and an extra reason to avoid is thrown in as well. The second answer isn't unsupportive or un-feeling, the problem is it's too supportive of the anxiety and not supportive of the child coping with it.

Not Under-reacting to Your Child's Anxiety

Some parents claim to not "believe" in anxiety. They may see the child's behavior as manipulative or simply not problematic. This is one of the most dangerous parenting situations. When a parent doesn't see his child's anxiety as real, the child has two options- either to go underground, try to hide his anxiety which never works, or try to convince himself that there is something wrong with him because of what his parent says. Children in this situation tend to become more symptomatic, may suffer from depression, and if they are old enough may use drugs or alcohol to treat the symptoms of anxiety. Or, the other option is to make the symptoms more pronounced in order to get the proper attention he needs. No parent wants to stand in the way of their child's health. If you are having trouble accepting your child's anxiety, please get help for yourself. You may be feeling helpless because you don't know how to "fix" your child, and rather than confront that pain, you devalue the problem. Perhaps you have some resentment because you may have had a difficult or abusive childhood and since you are giving your child a better life

it is hard to accept that it wouldn't be enough somehow. Or, you may not have anxious wiring, so it may be hard to put yourself in your child's shoes. Don't let your limitations keep your child from getting the help he needs. Take the leap, accept that your child, like millions of other anxious children, come by their anxiety honestly. It's not a scheme. There are plenty less painful ways for kids to manipulate or get out of things.

Being aware of your own emotional reactions to your child will help you be more effective in how you intervene with them. You can use the following exercise to identify feelings that may be uncomfortable for you, but are perfectly normal.

- What is the feeling about your child that makes you feel most uncomfortable?
- What are you afraid that this feeling means about you as a parent?
- What do you really believe is a more likely explanation?
- Do you think other parents would feel the same way?
- What do you need to do to address that feeling (write about it, give yourself some breathing room, coordinate with your spouse, get more help)

Parenting an anxious child is an intense but ultimately very meaningful journey. Taking care of your own feelings will help you stay on course and not inadvertently sidetrack the process. Forgiveness is an important emotion that we often overlook. If you see that your emotions have gotten in a tangle with your child's, be compassionate—with yourself. Each journey begins with the first step; your new awareness will give you the clarity to set you moving on a new path.