

LADC Behavior Handout



Strategies to Reduce Child's Anxiety

Learn a new way that parents can change their behavior to help their child's anxiety

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Alternative Parental Behaviors to Reduce Child's Anxiety

Anxiety is a natural emotion that many children experience as they are learning, growing, and exploring the world. Anxiety is a necessary emotion for all children to experience; however, it can get to a point where it becomes more dysfunctional and impacts your child's ability to function in day-to-day activities. As parents, when your child is worried or anxious, you may have a natural tendency to want to protect them or help them cope with a difficult situation. Parental accommodation and assistance work great with the vast majority of children and provide the support for them to be able to slowly move past some of their fears and try new things. However, in some children, parental accommodations in children can lead to bigger anxiety and more avoidance behaviors from the child. This newsletter is going to talk about some small changes parents can make, in their own behavior, in order to slowly help their child build resilience and tolerance of anxiety/uncertainty.

Function of Anxiety

Anxiety seeks out two things, certainty and comfort. Anxiety is maintained in children because the main function is to escape the feeling. This is done in two ways: 1) avoid the anxiety provoking stimuli all-together (e.g. not leave mother's side when at a new place) or engage in a behavior to reduce the already present anxiety provoking stimuli (e.g. get comfort from parents). One thing that is very often going to happen if your child is anxious is that they will rely on you for assistance in avoiding their fear. That is natural and that's exactly what children are supposed to do when they feel threatened. However, we also want to teach children that they can handle hard things and to rely on themselves to cope with anxious feelings. This will be more sustainable in the long-term.

Alternative Response to Child's Anxiety

Anxiety Always Wants More

Think of anxiety like the book "If You Give A Mouse A Cookie". If you haven't read it, I highly recommend reading it because it perfectly describes what happens when parents give in to ways to help their child cope with their anxious feeling; anxiety ALWAYS wants more. Slowly, that one more hug at bedtime doesn't feel as comforting or that extra kiss at drop-off just doesn't take the anxious feeling away. Anxiety then wants more from parents to help cope with an anxiety provoking situation. It is very easy to slowly give in to more and more comforting behaviors for your child because in an adult brain, it probably seems like it takes only a few more seconds and isn't worth the fight. However, anxiety always wants more.

Reasons Why Parents Accommodate

- ▶ It makes day to day interactions easier
- ▶ It helped your other children get over their fears
- ▶ You feel like a bad parent if you don't help your child
- ▶ You feel that your child will not feel loved if you don't help
- ▶ You are scared of their large behavioral outbursts if you don't help
- ▶ It is hard to tolerate your child's distress

Examples of Anxiety Accommodations

Research shows 97% of families report engaging in at least some form of accommodation or behavior that helps reduce their child's anxiety on a frequent basis. And for some children, this is sufficient to help get past a small worry and their anxiety doesn't ask for more. However, for children who may be genetically predisposed to anxiety disorders, their brain has a hard time moving past that anxiety. Some examples of parental accommodations that you may find yourself engaging in include: giving in to child demands (e.g. having to lay down next to them until they fall asleep, even if it takes an hour); participating in your child's anxiety rituals (e.g. having to say goodbye a certain way with a certain number of hugs); or providing excessive amounts of reassurance (e.g. over and over answering your child's anxiety questions or reminding them that they are safe). Some other common examples of parental accommodations include giving in to your child's demands that they never want to be alone in a room in the house, parent having to always accompany child into basement to play, answering for your child in public when someone asks their name, never having babysitters so your child doesn't have to be away from parents, allowing child to sleep in parents bed/room, and prolonged encounters before separating from a parent (e.g. excessive hugs or reassurance).

What Accommodating Behaviors Could You Modify to Help Expose Your Child to More Anxiety Provoking Situations?

Parental Changes Continued

Protection Versus Support

Often parents will say that it is their job to help protect their child, which is why they end up helping their child feel better by reducing their anxiety. But an important question to ask yourself is if their fears aren't actually dangerous, what are you protecting them from? The common response to this question is "fear" itself. However, if we are protecting them from their fear or any other unpleasant emotion (e.g. anger, disappointment, etc.), we are inadvertently teaching children that fear/anxiety, itself, is something dangerous and should be avoided. This sends the message that we must always find a way to escape unpleasant emotions quickly. An alternative to the concept of protection is support. There are two important components of support that must be present to be effective. The first is acceptance. We want to accept that what they are feeling is very real and scary to them. We can validate that it is hard, and we understand they are afraid. The second component is to communicate the belief in their ability to handle difficult things. Some of the phrases you could use with your child include: this feeling will go away, let's get comfortable until it does, or it is scary AND you are brave!

Making Changes Gradually

If you choose to make some changes to some ways you respond to your child's anxiety or child's request for specific comforting behaviors from you, it will be important to make those changes gradually to have success. For example, if your child asks you a lot of reassurance questions, you could begin by having question tokens. You can give your child so many tokens each day and if she wants to ask an anxiety question, then she must use one of her tokens. Make sure to have a reward system to help motivate them to do the hard work to beat the anxiety. Overtime, you can slowly reduce the number of question tokens. You can do the same thing for extra hugs or coming out of their room at bedtime!

Why Accommodations Can Make Anxiety Worse

One thing that maintains anxiety is negative reinforcement. Ultimately, what this means is that when parents do something or when avoiding something takes away anxiety, it is reinforcing and makes a child want that to be done more and more. Another reason why it can make anxiety worse is that it prevents children from habituating to their anxiety. All anxiety will eventually go away on its own, whether or not the child does something to take it away, this is called habituation. Think of a cold swimming pool. When you first jump into that pool, it is freezing; however, over time, your body gets used to it. This is called habituation.

Ultimately, if children escape anxiety provoking situations all the time, their brain never naturally learns that the feared situation isn't as bad as initially thought and that the bad feeling does go away! Finally, we want to teach children that they can manage their own feelings and don't need to be dependent on their parent to feel safe, every day or in typical daily situations.