6 Ways Adults Can Reduce Anxiety in Children: Developing a Healthy Emotional Lifestyle to Increase Brave Behaviors in Children

By: Cassandra M. Faraci, Psy.D.

Early in our development, we formulate "core beliefs" about ourselves, the world, other people, and our future. As young ones, we think *Am I smart? Am I athletic? Am I likable? Do bad things happen in the world? Are those bad things more likely to happen to me?* As we get older and our sense of self develops, we make conclusions to answer those questions based on our experiences and our interpretations of those experiences. *I'm smart* or *I'm dumb. People like me* or *People don't like me.* The core beliefs that often operate in an anxious child's mind are:

Bad things are likely to happen to me.
The world is a very scary place.
I can't cope with negative events.
I'm ineffective/not competent.
I'm usually wrong when I do things.
There is a right way and a wrong way to do things; there is no in between.
I'm going to fail.
Others will be disappointed in me.

If a child assumes that they're incapable of navigating life's stressors and that their future is likely to be full of negative outcomes, it makes logical sense why they're anxious! Wouldn't we all be?

As parents and professionals working with children, we have an opportunity to positively shape a child's sense of self so that they develop realistic and helpful core beliefs. They are accurate detectives in deciding what threats are likely to happen, and which ones are possible but very unlikely. They can also be taught to develop an accurate sense of their ability to handle stressors and trust their abilities to problem solve when those stressors arrive. By doing this, we can help prevent emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression.

We're often asked, "What can I do to help my anxious child?" While there are very specific science-supported techniques that we teach to help anxious children (and I've written a handout and blog article on them), I'm a firm believer in also changing the emotional lifestyle in the home. Think about it: If a child is overweight, a medical doctor will likely work with the family on healthy eating and exercise habits. These are meant for the entire family to be done as a lifestyle, not as a short-term solution. By making something a lifestyle, it becomes part of your day, your routine, your way of being. After time, it becomes less and less of a focus and just becomes naturally part of your day-to-day life. This creates an environment that is conducive for a child becoming and remaining healthy. Our mental, emotional, and behavioral worlds are very much shaped by inherited traits, but how the environment interacts with these traits also plays a large role. I see my role as helping parents create an optimal environment for prevention of such things as anxiety or reducing significant anxiety that has already taken place.

So, what are these *emotional lifestyle* changes that you can make right now to help your anxious child?

1. Give anxiety a name.

By calling your child's anxiety a "worry bully" or even "The Big Bad Wolf", you separate the worry from your child. It helps children to understand that there is nothing wrong with them (thereby fighting any negative core beliefs they may have about themselves) and increases their feelings of being in control. Naming the anxiety gives you and your child a common enemy to fight.

2. Use the phrase "Not yet" or "Yet".

You will likely hear a child say, "I can't…" We encourage adults to remind the child to add the phrase "…yet" to the end of the "I can't…" statement. By doing this, you are reminding the child that, with effort and time, their goals are reachable. For example, "I can't get the ball in the basket" becomes, "I can't get the ball in the basket yet." An adult can say, "Not yet, maybe. I bet if you practice more, you will!" This helps to prevent the child from making the conclusion, "I'm a bad basketball player" or "I'm not athletic" and accurately reminds them that, with effort, they can improve. Our goal here is to prevent children from making global negative conclusion about themselves and reminding them that their achievement is not predetermined by their inherited traits but is strongly related to effort.

3. Ask "What did you learn from that mistake?"

We see a lot of children (and adults) afraid of making mistakes and struggling with significant anxiety because of it. We live in a culture that focuses on perfection. The perfect job. The perfect GPA. The perfect home. The perfect spouse. The perfect parent. The perfect body. We have very, very high standards that we use to make judgments, and often, these standards are unrealistic and impossible to meet. As adults, we want to prevent this style of thinking in children. When a child complains about a mistake, we encourage adults to say, "That's ok. What did you learn from that mistake?" We follow up with discussing how mistakes help our brains grow and learn. If children accidentally knock down building blocks, for example, we'd remind them that, because they're building it again, they are going to be even more knowledgeable about how to build! Talk in their language. I encourage adults to talk about "levels" because kids are very into video games, karate, and other activities that have levels. I teach them that, to get to the next "level", you need to be at a level that has mistakes so that new learning is occurring. It's all about the learning. It's not about being perfect. Encourage the process of learning and persistence, not the outcome.

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(908) 914-2624
info@anxietyandbehaviornj.com
www.anxietyandbehaviornj.com

4. Model bravery.

Because I'm working hard to create a good emotional environment for my children, I will find any opportunity I can to model good coping. A few days ago, my children wanted to bake cookies with me. I purposely voiced some worries to them, "I'm afraid they won't taste good. What if they are overcooked? What if no one likes them? I'm not sure I should bake cookies." Without skipping a beat, my 4- and 6-year-olds said, "Mommy, how will you know if you don't try? Your brain could be wrong. You have to teach your brain that they will probably taste good, and it will be okay if they don't. We'll still love you! You have to try, though." I took a deep breath, baked the cookies, and when they turned out fine, I said, "You're right! My brain was wrong. They're delicious! I'm sure glad I didn't run away from baking cookies!" Imagine having these conversations over and over again as part of your lifestyle. You'd be doing a great job at planting accurate and helpful beliefs in your children's minds, such as "It's ok to make mistakes (see #3 above)", "I can do more than my anxious thoughts are telling me", "I can cope with stressful situations", and "Bad things are not as likely to happen as I currently think they are."

5. Stay calm.

When I see parents and children in the same office, it's often very apparent that, when a child starts to escalate in emotions, the parents get swooped into the middle of the "storm." What this does is make everyone escalate over each other! More concerning to me is that it's possibly inadvertently sending a message to the child that, "This is such a big deal. Look at how upset my parents are." By remaining calm, you'll be sending the alternate message, "This is not as big of a deal as I thought. Everyone around me is calm. If they're calm, it's probably okay." This is called vicarious learning. If you saw a person walk across a bridge, stop half way, scream, and run back, would you cross the bridge yourself? Probably not! Through vicarious learning, you've seen how another person reacted to the environment and will look to protect yourself by using that information to decide how you want to act. A helpful conclusion is, "I don't know what's on the other side of that bridge, but I probably don't want to find out!", and you'd avoid crossing the bridge, thus keeping yourself safe. This applies to anxiety, too. If adults remain calm, we can vicariously teach children that their worst fears are unlikely to happen (or, wouldn't we be freaking out, too?).

6. Use "team" lingo.

I encourage adults to use "we" and "team" a lot when working with kids. It reminds children that they have support, and just like team activities, some portions are done solo (running down the soccer field when the other team's players are behind you), and other portions require team assistance (working with the team to pass the soccer ball until one person has a shot). This is common language in our house because I want my children to know that we've got their backs even if we don't jump in to solve every problem for them (we want them to learn the process of problem solving).