

# Child Anxiety and Parental Response

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As a Licensed Professional Counselor who specializes in the treatment of child anxiety disorders, I'm constantly on the lookout for good information on the subject. I recently read an article by Vicky Flory on a type of parenting called, Emotionally Attuned Parenting (EAP). EAP believes that how a parent thinks about their child greatly affects how they will respond to that child. If a parent thinks negatively about his or her child, then they will withhold emotional support and empathy. Empathy involves both a thinking and emotional component- the understanding of another person's perspective, and the ability to express emotional concern about someone's distress. EAP believes there are four thinking patterns that are very damaging to the parent/child relationship, namely seeing the child as hostile, unreasonable, not genuine in demonstrated affect, and the child not being emotionally dependent upon the parent.

The repetitive thought of seeing the child as hostile interferes with parental support because the parent views the child as mean and their intentions motivated by malice. The parent overly focuses on the child's negative behaviors and misses the distressed emotions fueling the behavior. The parent feels angry at the child's perceived willful callous behavior and responds with a punitive and dismissive response. The child's emotional needs are left unmet, he or she feels ignored or attacked, causing the child to feel more distressed and act out accordingly.

Ten year-old "Bruce" felt this way. His anxious, obsessive tendencies toward perfectionism and order caused him to be easily irritated and hostile when his siblings moved his things or prevented him from accomplishing tasks his way. His father and stepfather saw his reactions as disrespectful and pounced on him with anger and punishment. This only fueled Bruce's obsessive tendencies, mistakenly believing that if he could do everything perfectly, he would escape any criticism. He entered treatment feeling unloved and inept at his inability to make his "plan" succeed.

The second repetitive thought as seeing the child as unreasonable hinders parental support by perceiving the child as beyond help and unable to respond/learn in a normal manner. The parent increasingly grows fatigued and ambivalent toward the child. Focus is on behavior management through angry verbal and non-verbal responses, and punitive consequences. The child's emotional needs are unmet. The child's view of himself or herself grows more negative, and the anxious behaviors worsen.

Eight year-old "Susie" was considered a spoiled princess. She struggled with insecure attachment separation anxiety, fearing being away from her parents sight for even a few minutes. She demanded attention and had such a temper-tantrum when a babysitter was employed that the parents felt they had no choice but to give into her demands in order to keep the peace. Susie's mom was especially fatigued, having her underfoot for years and clinging to the hope that with age things would be better.

The third cognition held by the parent is that the child's demonstrated emotions are not genuine hinder parental support by the misinterpretation of child affect. The parent's view the child as manipulative, dramatic, and disingenuous. Verbal and non-verbal indicators of obvious distress are misconstrued, dismissive and punitive consequences are administered. This leaves the child emotionally isolated, which typically leads to an escalation of negative emotions and behavior.

"Bobby" felt that he was constantly misunderstood. His parents accused him of crying wolf and that he exaggerated his fears for attention. Bobby had general anxiety disorder (GAD), an anxious condition where the child worries over many things. He worried about beings safe in his home, the car breaking and having to get into a stranger's car, missing the bus, losing his homework assignments, and many other things. He just felt the world was a big, bad, scary place and he was ill-equipped to handle it. Believing his parents would no longer support him with his fears, he tried to stuff them deep inside, but that only made things worse and he couldn't help but let his emotions come forth.

The final hindering thought is the view that the child is not emotionally dependent upon the parent. This belief is highly inaccurate since the child is solely dependent upon the parent. The child acts as if the parents weren't needed at all except to provide food and funds. There is little affection or appreciation shown to the parent. Parents need positive feedback from their children to affirm them in their parenting, and when this is not received, they experience anger and ambivalence and express that to the child in destructive ways. The child is blocked in receiving emotional support and negative symptoms escalate.

"Jessica's" coping style to her social anxiety disorder was to act indifferent towards others. She came across as narcissistic and cold. For her, to express emotional dependency upon another was very risky because they could be reject her. Deep inside she felt worthless and unattractive. She expressed to me once, "Why would anyone want to be friends with me?" "I'm not a very nice person; that's what my parents say."

Do you find yourself relating to one or more of these negative thoughts? Are you stuck in a rut in how you view your child? There are many ways to break these patterns and heal the relationship. Let me offer you a few suggestions.

First, recognize that many of the negative behavioral patterns you see are rooted the child feeling anxious or depressed. Developing empathy for another is one of the most effective ways to change one's interactive pattern with that person. Sit down with your child and ask them what it feels like when they feel anxious and afraid. Patiently encourage them to speak about their inner feelings and what types of things make them upset. You may have to do this a few times for them to build trust in you. Apologize for your past reactions to them and stress to them that you love them and will strive to express that love to them.

Second, offer your child fresh start, a new day each and every day. Discontinue bringing up the past and how "nothing ever changes." A parents fatigue can make them very vexing, bringing up past offenses over and over again. This is done out of desperation by the parent to persuade the child to change but it only has the effect of shaming the child and making them more anxious. Deal with each day's issue as a separate incident from the past. Patiently work through the problem and encourage the child in their strength to address the anxious producing issue.

Third, watch your assumptions and slow down your responses to your child. Focus more on their hearts, their emotions, rather than just their behavior. Pay attention to their facial expressions, if they look hurt, they probably are. Address their hurt. Stay attuned to their emotions, their heart. If nothing changes, nothing changes. Believe in your heart that things can get better and express that hope with your child. Give them a vision of what they'll life will be someday when they are free from their fears. A child who can see a future free

from fear can move towards it, and the fact that his or her parent can see it too makes it all the more believable and hopeful. Stay attuned to your child's emotions and avoid the pitfalls of these 4 beliefs.

For more information go to [www.myanxiouschild.com](http://www.myanxiouschild.com).

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Ref. Flory, V. (2004). A novel clinical intervention for severe childhood depression and anxiety.

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