

Two Parenting Mistakes with Anxious Children

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Tyler begins to cry, raising his hands to cover his eyes. Eleven-year old boys hate to cry, and Tyler is especially fearful of it. It embarrasses him and makes him feel weak, even within the safe environment of my counseling room. His mother knows this, and with watery eyes herself reaches out and rubs his shoulder. "I'm sorry, honey," she says. With that he begins to cry harder, leaning over his crossed legs on the couch. I think to myself. *One of the two mistakes parents can make in dealing with an anxious child.* Indeed, mothers nurture and comfort their hurting children. Yes, of course. But is it possible with an anxious child that may be the entirely wrong thing to do?

North American children are experiencing clinical anxiety at ever increasing rates. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that thirteen percent of U.S. children experience disordered anxiety, while the figure for adults is twenty-percent. The University of Michigan Depression Center, the nation's first, estimates that fifteen percent of college students nationwide suffer from anxiety. Clearly children are suffering unprecedented levels of clinical anxiety, finding their minds hijacked by a myriad of fears. Even the most well-meaning parent is not intuitively equipped to deal with this. As a professional counselor who, for precisely a zillion years, has helped anxious children and their parents, I've witnessed anguished parents floundering to figure out how to best parent a fearful child. I have seen otherwise competent and good-intentioned parents inadvertently make mistakes that actually hinder the freedom of their children. By recognizing and correcting these two parenting mistakes, a parent can turnaround their child's worries and set them free.

The first mistake parents make in hindering their children's progress in overcoming anxiety is to *feel sorry for them*. A parent sees their child suffering and it breaks their heart. They project onto the child their own memories of suffering and pain, and mistakenly believe that the child must be feeling just as awful. Sometimes the child does, but often they don't. Anxious children cry easily, and regardless if their tears are releasing tension or, in some cases, manipulating the situation, the wise parent will not respond by feeling sorry for the child.

Seeing Tyler's tears melts mom's heart. She wants his tears to cease, so she suspends his movement forward towards freedom and let's him off the hook. Feeling sorry for him only fuels Tyler's sense of helplessness and hopelessness. He may interpret his mom's concern as, "Gee, she thinks I can't handle it either so I must be *really* weak!" The shared state of fear by both mother and child creates further dependency. Tyler, believing he is incapable of persevering through emotional stress and seeing that confirmed by his mother's response, seeks

mom's comfort ever more. Mom, misguided by her belief that a mother's job is to always show love and support for her child by comforting and easing his fears, believes she is a caring mother and doing the correct thing. They feed off each other and the pattern deepens, sometimes for life. I've worked with many fathers who have tried to break the mother/child emotional dependent bond to no avail. It's only when mom understands the emotional reward she's getting from the relationship, and the price paid by her child, that she ceases to overly comfort him. Failure to let a child struggle perpetuates the child's helpless state and leads to the mistake number two.

The second parenting mistake made by parents of anxious children is to *rescue their child from suffering*. I once worked with two sisters who were terrified of scary movies. I'm not talking horror movies, but Disney movies! Every time the villain had their big scene, the girls demanded the movie be shut off and their parents promptly accommodated them. They never had watched a Disney movie to the end. The girls were practicing, and the parents were reinforcing, the number one coping behavior that both children and adults use to deal with their fears: avoidance. The whole family moved away from the fear to calm the girl's anxious response, but it only strengthened the fear in the long-run. I explained the parent that because the children never learned to suffer through the scary parts, they never learned to calm their flight response and experience the happy ending. I called a family meeting, explained the how they all danced the jig of avoidance to Disney movies, and gave them new *steps* to dance.

A highly effective technique used to help children overcome fear is called *exposure*. Exposure is the process of introducing the fear provoking stimulus in a gradual way and allowing the child to built up tolerance to it. Slowly, *step by step*, the child overcomes their fear through successive exposure and tolerance formation. The key component that enables this technique to be successful is the child's willingness to tolerate small doses of *suffering*. By learning to manage one's temporary states of suffering, the child gains mastery over the anxious producing experience. So my prescription for these sisters was to go home, have the whole family snuggle up on the couch, and watch the movies *all the way through*, discovering through exposure that they could in fact handle the scary parts and that it all works out in the end. It worked and the girls can now watch the movies on their own.

Just like Tyler's mother who over comforted him during his experience of crying, when we over comfort ourselves through avoidance, we tell ourselves that it really must be bad and that we can't handle it. The way to find freedom from fear is to turnaround the pattern of avoidance into gradual exposure and build up a tolerance to it. It's just like stepping into a hot bath. At first it may be painful, but as your body learns to tolerate the heat, it becomes pleasurable.

"Kids need to feel badly sometimes," says child psychologist David Elkind, professor at Tufts University. "We learn through experience and we learn through bad experiences. Through failure we learn how to cope." It's true! When we workout at the gym, we "stress" the muscle so that it grows and becomes stronger. In the same way, as you allow your child to experience the stress of fear, and no longer feel sorry that they are experiencing short periods of pain while their minds adjust to the negative experience, they have a chance to then turnaround their fear and be free of it.

Though Tyler still doesn't like to cry (after all, he's still an eleven year old boy), he no longer fears it nor fights it. He uses the phrase I taught him from the audio treatment program I co-created called *Turnaround: Turning Fear Into Freedom*, "It is what it is, just chill with it!" Mom has learned that suffering is not always a bad thing, and focuses on sending him the message through her words and actions, "I trust you can handle this and I'll patiently walk beside you as you solve this problem in your own strength." She feels encouraged and joyous as her son takes flight in his new found strength, and finds that her strength has come out more too. Both have turned around their fears and found greater freedom.

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