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PARENT MANAGEMENT OF ANXIETY SPACE:

Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions

We know that just saying to someone who is afraid “Don’t be afraid anymore,” or “Do this and you will feel better about it,” usually doesn’t really work. As parents, you probably wish you could just flip some switch in your child’s brain to make them think, act or feel differently—but the truth is you can’t. In fact, trying to make someone feel differently than they do usually makes them even more defensive. You may have already experienced this with your child?

We simply can’t *make* someone different, unless they ask us to help them change. “You are not the problem here; however, you can be an important part of the solution.”

You have the most knowledge about **your child’s** anxiety— I am knowledgeable about anxiety, but you have the most knowledge about **your child’s** anxiety—

By waiting interminably for the child to agree to work on the problem they may be placing a burden on the children’s shoulders that they are as yet incapable of bearing.

Most of the time, we prefer to solve every problem in a cooperative way. We believe in “talking things through” and “using our words” to resolve conflict, and in compromise as a way of managing interpersonal tensions. But all of these strategies rely on two sides working together and on a dialogue aimed at achieving common goals. Sometimes a child is just too anxious to be a partner in the process. In anxiety, just like in many other contexts, children often need their parents to guide them—even against their wishes. Many children actually secretly hope their

parents will act without their agreement, because they understand that while something may seem frightening to them, doing nothing means not getting better. Think of your child as having many inner voices; some of the voices represent the fear and anxiety, and right now these may be clamoring the most loudly so that only they are heard. But consider that there are other voices inside as well. Voices that represent the child's will to be able to cope more, to be free to do more things or feel more comfortable. By acting independently of what the child is saying right now, you are aligning yourself with those voices and giving him or her your support.

Some children may feel compelled to resist the changes you make, because of their anxiety. This is normal and to be expected. If children were able to take the long view and act in their own long-term best interests all the time they wouldn't be children at all. They would be quite remarkable adults. However, it is important that you remind yourself that you are acting in your children's best interests and that the steps you take will not harm them.

Anxiety disorders exist when a child experiences exaggerated anxiety relating to things or situations that do not actually pose a real danger. For some children the anxiety system is triggered internally by worry, obsessive thoughts, or panic attacks, even when there are no external triggers for it. Children with anxiety disorders try to find ways to not experience anxiety, or to make themselves feel better when their anxiety is activated, just as other children do. The difference is that because of the disorder they need to do this more often or in less appropriate situations than other children. Anxiety includes behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and physiological aspects.

As children grow they usually become more and more separated from their parents. They go different places, do different things, spend their time with other people, have different interests, and feel different emotions. However, because children rely on their parents when they are anxious, separation is difficult for a child with a lot of anxiety. It may be hard to spend time separately if your child is constantly worried about you, for example. Or if your children rely on you to do a lot of things instead of them, because they make them too nervous or uncomfortable it will be hard for them to function independently. This is natural and we refer to this as the effect that anxiety has on the *personal boundaries* separating child from parents.

If you are like most other parents of anxious children, you probably find yourself torn between the need to help your children feel better or get things done and the desire to show them that there is no real danger and that they can manage on their own. Being the parent of an anxious child usually means facing that dilemma thousands of times. What we have found is that, in fact, children respond the best when parents are able to combine both of those ideas into one message. In other words, the best reactions from parents to children's fears are those that combine an acceptance and legitimization of children's fears with a belief in that children's ability to withstand slightly more anxiety than they have until now.

One of our goals is to help her get better at *relying on herself*, but it's natural for her to have looked to you for protection until now.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Accommodation refers to any actions you may be doing, or even to things you are deliberately not doing, because of your child's anxiety disorder. Of course, helping a child to avoid things that are actually dangerous is not accommodation but rather healthy protection. So holding your child's hand when crossing the street, when they are too young to do it alone, is not accommodation but rather healthy protection. If your child is 16, however, and fully capable of crossing alone but afraid to do so, then holding his or her hand would be accommodation.

Examples of accommodation

There are endless possible ways in which parents may be accommodating children's anxiety symptoms. Below are some typical examples but the therapist should be aware of the need for a thorough review of parental behavior relating to the anxiety.

- Speaking in place of a child with social anxiety.
- Sleeping next to a child who fears being in bed alone.
- Writing notes excusing a child from speaking in class.
- Not going out in the evening or only having one particular babysitter.
- Participating in OCD rituals such as hand washing or repetitive checking.
- Answering questions relating to a child's persistent worry.
- Providing the child with information about the parent's schedules or plans.

- Cutting food for a child who is afraid of touching a knife.
- Not inviting guests to the home.
- Not opening windows or shades.
- Not throwing away unnecessary items.
- Repetitive or overly rigid nighttime rituals.
- Reassuring a child they have not done wrong.
- Buying particular food products or avoiding specific foods because of a child's anxiety.

- Not bringing home books or movies with anxiety provoking stimuli.
- Driving particular routes.
- Refraining from using certain words.
- Swearing or promising that certain things will not happen.
- Taking a child to unnecessary medical checkups or procedures.
- Leaving lights on in the home.
- Not having balloons in the house.
- Preparing particular clothing articles.
- Doing homework instead of a child because of anxiety.
- Accompanying child to a part of the house he or she fears approaching alone.

1. Charting Accommodation

Use the accommodation chart included to create as detailed a description of the accommodating behaviors of both parents as possible, as well as any sibling accommodation. The chart should be completed with the therapist and should serve as a template, which can be changed and modified based on the needs and circumstances of the individual family and child.

When it is unclear whether a certain behavior is accommodation to anxiety or simply a parental choice, for example, the parent who chooses the child's clothing each day, or the parent who regularly telephones the child during the day to check up on him or her, try to use questions such as:

Do (did) you do this with all your children?

Would you like to be able to stop this behavior?

If your child were not anxious would you still do this?

What would happen if you did not do this one day?

Informing the child – The Written Announcement

Remember that by making even one small change you are teaching your child a tremendously important lesson—**that they can get better. And that you can help them to do it.**

Find a time when you and your child are both calm and relaxed. It is important to have both parents present for this discussion, so make sure to pick a time when you are both free of other obligations and distractions. You may need to arrange for someone to watch the other siblings while you are having this conversation, or perhaps choose a time when they are out of the home. This part of the process should never be done at the moment at which your child's anxiety has been triggered. In other words, if your child is afraid of going down into the basement alone and has just come up after a failed attempt to go there, don't take that moment as the opportunity to say "You know, we really need to talk about that— we are going to be working on that very fear." Rather, wait for a time when your child is not acting fearful and you are not feeling frustrated by his avoidance.

Sit down with him in a relaxed way and say, "We know how difficult it is for you to do _____ (fill in as appropriate). We understand it makes you feel really anxious or afraid. We want you to know that this is perfectly natural and everyone feels afraid some of the time. But we also want you to know that it is our job as your parents to help you get better at things that are hard for you, and we have decided to do exactly that. We are going to be working on this for a while and we know it will probably take time, but we love you too much not to help you when you need help. Soon we'll talk about it again and we will have some ideas for things to do that will make you get better at handling _____. We are really very proud of you!"

An announcement centered on the child, such as, “From now on you will . . .” or “As of today you may not . . .” leads to arguments and resistance. Focusing on the children may cause them to feel they need to prove to the parents that they are wrong, and that they cannot force them to change. An announcement that focuses on the parents’ intentions concedes that they can only control their side of the relationship with their child. This emphasis reinforces their personal boundary; the message delivered is: “This is our position, but we cannot dictate your reaction!”

Sample Announcement I—An 11-Year-Old Girl With Separation Anxiety

Ashley, we know that you suffer greatly every time you have to stay home alone, and at bedtime. We see how hard these moments are for you, and how much your fears are hurting you. But we also realize that our behavior so far, staying with you constantly, and allowing you to sleep with us in our bed, not only didn’t help, but actually made things worse. Therefore, we have decided that from now on we will no longer ignore the problem. We will help you not give in to your fears. We will talk with you again soon about some changes, such as us going out more and helping you to stay in your own bed. We have also decided not to keep the problem a secret, we are proud of you and we will turn to anyone we think of who can help us. We will gladly give you all the support you need to deal with your fears, including therapy, if you want it. But the support will not be by giving in to your fears. —Your loving parents.

Sample Announcement II—A 9-Year-Old Boy With School Phobia and Refusal

Steven, we love you so much. We understand that going to school, and even thinking about it, makes you very uncomfortable. We saw how hard you tried to go and we know you are truly anxious about it. We also believe that going to school is extremely important for you and we are completely confident that you will be able to overcome this fear. We have decided not to allow you to stay home from school anymore and we will be doing everything we can to make sure that this changes. We are not angry at you and are not trying to punish you. We simply care too much to allow your fear to hurt you in this way. We will be getting help from anyone who can help us to succeed at this challenge and we hope you will work together with us on this problem. We love you very much—Mom and Dad.

Dealing with Child Reactions to the Announcement

You know in your heart and your belly that you love this child and that you are acting out of love for her. This is not the time to try to prove that or to convince her of the fact. Sometimes children will feel that way, and more commonly they will say it because they recognize the impact it has on you. By overcoming the emotional discomfort this kind of statement causes you—you are actually expressing your love in the most important way! You are allowing yourself to be hurt **because** you love her so much.

Distress

In this category we include reactions that involve displays of distress such as crying or sobbing dramatically. These displays usually reflect true distress but can also be a means of putting pressure on the parents to reassure them that they will not do anything unpleasant or difficult. For obvious reasons parents will have to resist this impulse, despite the emotional stress of doing so. Once the announcement has been completed parents can comfort children by hugging them or otherwise soothing them but should refrain from talking about the content of announcement itself. Questions about the anxiety should be avoided and, as with the more argumentative child, parents should state clearly one time that they are considering how best to act and will not discuss it further at this point.

Reducing Accommodating Behaviors

Examples of Plans for Reducing Accommodation for a Child with Repeated Phone Calls to Parents Throughout the Day

- Mother and Father will each not respond to more than one phone call a day.
- Mother and Father will each call child one time per day. Mother will call at 2 p.m. and father will call at 4:00 p.m.
- Child will be rewarded – one Disney princess card – for every day they do not call each parent more than one time.
- Child will be informed of this in advance.
- Child will be instructed to send a text message in case of urgent need to communicate with parents. The text message must include the specific reason for calling. Any other messages will not be responded to.

For a Child with Separation Anxiety Who Will Not Stay Alone

- Parents will leave the home together for 5 minutes each evening—time to be increased gradually.*
- Parents will take their phone but will not respond to calls from child.*
- Parents will arrange for another person (possibly aunt or uncle) to speak on the phone with child while parents are out of the house—if child wishes.
- Child will be informed of the plan in detail—including exact time that parents will be out.
- Parents will be careful to return after specified time.

*If child is willing to engage in the process then the length of parents' absence and the issue of responding to the phone will be negotiable. If child refuses to collaborate then parents will leave for the planned 5 minutes and not answer the phone.

For a Child Who Insists on Sealed Windows and Does Not Allow Strangers in the Home or Changes to Home

- Parents will open the window in their room including blinds—to be followed by additional windows in the house.
- Parents will invite at least three guests to the home over the coming week. Guests may address child and speak with him, but will not enter child's room unless invited.
- Parents will make one significant change to shared home space (either new rug in living room or new arrangement of seating—to be decided by parents).
- Changes to the home will be done while child is out or in his room—to avoid escalation.

For a Child with Extended “Good Night Rituals” Involving Both Parents

- One parent will say good night to child in bed—the other will say good night in the living room.
- Parent will leave the room immediately after saying good night.
- Parent will return to room after 20 minutes if child is awake or in distress but will not perform ritual. Parent will say “I know you are feeling uncomfortable right now, but I’m sure you will be okay.”
- Child will not be punished for staying up or acting out unless there is physical aggression.
- In the morning both parents will say, “I’m proud of you—you got to sleep without the rituals.”
- If child becomes overly distressed for more than 1 hour then the following night parents will arrange for aunt to stay in the home and will leave the house after saying good night once.
- Child will be informed of the plan—apart from the possibility of parents leaving the home.

Formulating the plan – Informing the child

Example:

Monica, last week we told you we were going to be thinking about ways to help you get better at handling the worry-thoughts you have every day. We know those thoughts make you really scared and are proud of you for doing so well at school and dance despite the thoughts. Even though you think you really need to talk to us on the phone when you have those thoughts, we are sure that you will actually be okay even if you don't talk to us. We believe that 100%. That's why from now on Mom and Dad are not going to answer the phone when you call us at work more than one time. You can talk to each of us one time and after that we will not answer any more. Because we know how hard it might be for you

we will also call you one time every day. Mom will call you at 2 and Dad will call you at 4. When you manage not to call each of us more than one time you will get a prize—one Disney princess card. If it is too hard for you one day and you call us more often than one time you can always try again the next day. But even if you do call we will not answer after the first time. If you have something that is really urgent to tell us, you can send mom or dad a text message and tell us what the matter is. We will decide if we should call you or not. We know this could be hard and we are not trying to punish you or hurt you. We love you and want to help.

Dealing with Child Reactions to Decreased Accommodation

Keep in mind that we are changing the rules that the child has come to rely on and to which you have conformed for a long time. It took a long time for you to feel prepared to act to overcome the anxiety and it is unrealistic to expect your child to feel just as prepared simply because you decided to act. You are doing what you know to be necessary and helpful in the long run, but your child may not see it that way yet and we cannot expect her to. Be prepared for her to feel more anxious or even to feel a sense of betrayal at your decisions. And remember that right now she needs you to be strong for her because she is not yet ready to be strong for herself. Sometimes being a parent is about doing what's right for your child even when they don't want you to.

Although some children may respond in dramatic or challenging ways parents should learn the most important rule:

The less you respond the more quickly the emotion will subside!

This rule holds true for many different kinds of emotional outbursts a child might exhibit. For example, children who feel a need to have a reassurance-seeking question answered may follow their parents around the house for a long time repeating the question and begging to have it answered. This is tremendously difficult to ignore. However, parents who successfully remain disengaged and do not become drawn in to the interaction will see their child more quickly distracted by another thought or simply exhausted by the persistent repetition. In contrast, children whose parents continue to engage with them around the issue (for example, "I said I would not answer that" "It's not that I don't want to, it's that I think you can be okay," or simply "Leave me alone") will continue the process for much longer. The simple rule that every child knows is: *As long as we are talking about this—there's a chance you'll change your mind!*

Reinforcement for the Child

When reinforcements for the child have not been structured into the plan the therapist should plan these in the first review session. Two main kinds of reinforcements are appropriate:

1. Reinforcement for positive behavior on the part of the child—for example, staying in their own bed, not asking questions, speaking to a stranger, and so on.
2. Reinforcement simply for having coped with changes the parents made. These are not contingent on the child *willingly* coping—they simply reflect the fact that they *have* coped.

Reinforcements can take many forms, including praise, prizes, shared activities, and others. Praise should be given generously and authentically—if the child spent one hour yelling parents should probably not say, “You handled that with poise,” but might say, “You got through it, and we’re proud of you—it clearly was very hard. Even when a child has reacted in a negative or disruptive way to the parental steps, and there is a need to correct this behavior, the fact of having “gotten through it” remains unchanged.

Bella was an 11-year-old girl who insisted on sleeping in her parents’ bed and forbade them to turn off the light even after she was asleep. The parents informed her she was no longer allowed to sleep in their bed and that if she did they would leave her alone there. At night, Bella tried to lie down next to her mother and both parents reminded her of their decision. When she insisted they left the room silently. Bella became very agitated and followed them around the house for more than an hour becoming increasingly abusive in her demands that they sleep next to her. Eventually, she became exhausted and fell asleep on the floor in her room. At breakfast her she entered the kitchen with a sheepish look. Her mother hugged her and whispered in her ear “I’m proud of you.” Bella looked confused, “I thought you would be mad at me for yesterday.” Her mother responded, “It was wrong to talk to us like that but do you realize what you did last night? You slept all by yourself in your room! That’s amazing! I’m just so proud.”

When more material reinforcements are used, such as prizes or treats these should be small enough to allow them to be repeated many times. Rather than promising a large prize for when a child becomes completely independent or makes very significant progress, parents should use very small reinforcements for every repetition of the desired coping behavior.

Teaching your child that they can cope with anxiety is giving them a wonderful gift, one they will need for the rest of their lives.

Discuss Maintaining Progress and Dealing with Future Exacerbations

Maintaining Gains

There is a likelihood that the child will resume some of the avoidance that has been diminished, if the opportunity exists. For example, a child who has become able to sleep alone might ask to sleep in the parents' bed again. A child who has returned to school might ask to stay home for one day. Encourage parents not to confuse the child by accommodating behaviors they have struggled to change.

Your child will still feel anxious some of the time, and may try to “test the waters” to see if he or she can resume some of the previous behavioral patterns. This does not reflect something bad and almost all children will be compelled to make at least one such attempt. You can show them that you still believe in them and are confident they can handle the anxiety.

Do not be afraid to rock the boat! In other words, do not try to keep things going smoothly by allowing the child to relapse. If you are confident and determined the challenge will pass much more quickly than if you confuse the child by making changes and going backward. You might say in a supportive way, “We see you are feeling a little anxious about that again. That’s normal but we know you can handle this.”

Cognitive Restructuring

Most parents are already engaging in this kind of dialogue with their children as a means of reassuring them, *but cognitive restructuring is not about their telling them a reassuring thought, but about the children juxtaposing their own anxious ideation with more realistic cognitions and practicing doing it repeatedly when anxious thought appear.*

Dealing with Extreme Disruptive Behavior

We need to remember that the anxiety response is one of “fight or flight”—that includes fight! Lots of people react aggressively when they’re anxious.

When she is less anxious it is likely that her aggressive behavior will also get much better, we need to make sure that the aggressive behavior itself doesn’t stop that from happening.

Introduce the Concept of Delayed Response

Explain that most reactions to a child's disruptive behavior, that occur while the child is being disruptive, tend to backfire. In other words, they make things worse (more disruptive behavior) rather than better (less disruptive behavior). Explain the following reasons, for why this occurs.

Child Is in a State of Heightened Arousal

When children are acting in aggressive or disruptive ways they are experiencing heightened, at times extreme, emotional and physical arousal that significantly alters their perception and interpretation of events. When feeling combative even relatively innocuous cues, such as a parent saying "You need to calm down now," may seem to the child to represent a threat or a challenge. Cognitive processing is impaired in this condition, as is the ability to accurately discern the intentions of others (a process termed *mentalization*).

Parent Is Under Stress

Children are not the only ones experiencing arousal when they are acting in a disruptive fashion. The stress of the situation, often exacerbated by a sense of failure, embarrassment, or frustration, will also have an effect on the parent. Parents, under these conditions, are more likely to act in impulsive or exaggerated ways, which tend to lead to escalation.

There Really Are No "Good Responses"

The feeling that a successful and effective parent would respond to aggression in "the perfect way," is no more than an illusion. In fact, this is part of a greater illusion that parents have the capacity, and by consequence the responsibility, to directly control a child's behavior. The truth, however, is that even the best parent cannot directly control the behavior of children, including making them stop acting out. By accepting this fact parents are relieved of an impossible chore and free to choose more productive ways to respond.

The concept of **delayed response** reflects an acceptance of these limitations. Parents are not expected to be able to manage the disruptive situation, and instead focus on *getting through it*. Their only role while the child is acting in the disruptive manner is to ensure physical safety and resist being drawn into the interaction. If children voice a threat to the parents they should avoid responding in kind (i.e., "You'll be sorry if you do . . ."). Instead they should remain silent, or merely state in a quiet way that the behavior is

unacceptable. If necessary, parents should attempt to distance themselves from the child in order to minimize the potential for escalation.

Parents may feel concerned that their refusal to respond to the child's provocation represents an abdication of their parental role. The parents are not refusing to respond but are merely refusing to become drawn into a hopeless situation. In fact, the most important response the parents can make is simply continuing the process of fostering better coping and self-regulation in the child. By seeing the explosive behavior as a child's way of saying "You see, you are making a mistake! You should not go ahead with this!" it becomes clear that the parent's determination to continue helping the child is the most effective response of all.

Explaining the Sit-In to Parents

Prepare for the sit-in by finding a time when both of you can be available, and free of other occupations, for 1 hour. If necessary, ask someone else or a babysitter to be in the home to look after siblings. Do not start the sit-in when you are feeling very angry about the behavior. Wait until you have calmed down. This will also help to make sure your child is less upset, too.

Enter the child's room and sit down. In a soft voice, state that you are there because of the child's behavior and that you are determined to solve this problem. Be specific about the behavior that has caused you to come. For example:

"Yesterday, when we did not agree to tell your friends you were not home, you acted violently. You hit your mother and broke her iPad. This is unacceptable and we will stay here now and wait for you to suggest a solution to this problem. We are not punishing you, but we cannot accept violence in our home."

Remain silently in the child's room for the rest of the duration of the sit-in. Do not ask him any more questions, and do not respond to arguments or provocation. If the child asks or tells you to leave, simply remain seated quietly.

If your child offers what seems like a reasonable solution, stand up, say, "Okay, we are going to try that" and leave the room. Do not talk about the sit-in after it is over. Even if the child retracts his solution after the sit-in, do not respond unless the behavior itself is repeated. In that case perform another sit-in but do not leave if the same solution is suggested again.

Duration: The sit-in should be adapted to the age of the child. For children under age 8, 20 minutes are sufficient; for children age 8 to 12, half an hour; for children over age 13, 1 hour.