

A Publication of Sharon Selby, M.A. Registered Clinical Counsellor:
EMPOWERING CHILDREN, PARENTS & FAMILIES



Common Mistakes to Avoid When Your Child is Anxious

Mistake #1

Over-Reassurance

= answering questions repeatedly

- Giving reassurance over and over again is exhausting and a vicious cycle. The more you give, the more your child wants you to keep on giving.
- By providing reassurance, you are confirming your child's irrational belief that he/she is in danger (*ie. This is a 911 emergency*) and needs your protection.
- Reassurance calms your child for an instant and then the anxiety takes charge again and becomes stronger because reassurance fuels the worries.

What to Do Instead?

- Explain to your child that this is not a 911 emergency, even though it may feel like one inside his/her mind and body.
- Help your child understand that the worries have taken over and are making up lies. You are therefore not going to answer any more questions, as this will feed the worries and make them stronger.
- Distract your child with another activity.
- When your child is calm, explain that in the future you and all family members will have a plan to answer the worry question just once, or depending on the situation, just ask your child to TRUST that everything is fine.

Mistake #2

Allowing Avoidance

- Avoidance fuels anxiety.
- By allowing avoidance, you are giving your child proof that whatever he/she is worried about is a real danger, and therefore the fight, flight or freeze response is warranted.

What to Do Instead?

- Explain to your child that this is not a 911 emergency, even though it may feel like one inside his/her mind and body.
- Help your child understand that our brains have true alarms (*when the fight-flight-freeze response is necessary*) and FALSE ALARMS, which is what happens with the worries/anxiety.
- Teach your child, that the only way to lessen the worries, is to do the opposite of what the worries are trying to tell you to do.
- Find a way for your child to overcome his/her worry, no matter how many small steps it might take (*ie. Fear of Swimming lessons - Take your child swimming at the pool with you a few times, then hire a private swimming instructor, next find out when that teacher is teaching a small group and arrange for your child to take part in those group lessons*).

Mistake #3

Completely Dismissing Worries

- Telling your child “This is all nonsense”.
- Saying “This is no big deal” and he/she should “Just get over it”.
- Conveying the message that anxiety is just made-up.

What to Do Instead?

- Explain to your child that everyone gets anxious sometimes. Back in the “cave-people” days, it was important to be on the constant look-out for danger, (*le. Sabre-Tooth Tigers*) but nowadays, we don’t need to be on constant alert.
- Help your child understand that you are on his/her team against the worries, and therefore he/she needs to trust you and follow your strategies.
- Point out times in the past when you were anxious/nervous and what you did to overcome your fear.
- Write out a list (*with your child*) of all the previous times that he/she was anxious, how he/she handled it, and how he/she felt at the end. This list provides concrete evidence against the worries.
- Problem-solve some options for handling the nerve-wracking situation.

Mistake #4

Enabling Unhealthy Coping

- **Allowing your child to withdraw** and isolate him/herself while playing video games, watching TV for hours, obsessing over social-media, over-eating etc.
- **Permitting your child to engage** in activities that create extra stress hormones such as watching horror movies, listening to sad, negative music etc.
- **No boundaries re: bedtime routine** (*lack of consistent bed-time, electronics and cell phones not being taken out of the bedroom at night - if you do allow them in the bedroom at all*).

What to Do Instead?

- Keep your child active - it is proven that exercise decreases anxiety. Go for family walks, bike-rides, enrol in organized sport etc.
- Keep your child busy to distract the anxious thoughts . Introverts do need more down-time but this should not include adrenaline-rush video games nor excessive social media which often increases social anxiety.
- Create a consistent bed-time which involves you taking an active-role. Many children, experiencing high anxiety, find it difficult to go to sleep and therefore try to procrastinate at bed-time, which equals less sleep and therefore lowers coping skills.

Mistake #5

Being Over-Protective

- Allowing your child to say “no” to all opportunities.
- Conveying the message to your child that you feel sorry for him/her.
- Letting your child make all the decisions, in hopes that this eases his/her anxiety.
- Doing whatever it takes in order that your child **doesn't** experience any tears or distress.

What to Do Instead?

- Find opportunities where you can push your child a little out of his/her comfort zone.
- Realize that non-dangerous distressing experiences, such as playing at a piano recital, are important and healthy events, where your child learns that he/she can handle distress.
- Believe in your child's capabilities! It is stressful to see your child highly anxious, but we do not want him/her to become a victim of the anxiety. It is imperative to give the message (verbally and non-verbally) that you and him/her together will beat the worries.
- Anxiety has a genetic component. Watch your own role-modelling. Are you always warning your child about every possible danger that could happen in the world? How do you handle new situations?

Mistake #6

Thinking Perfectionism is a Good Thing

- You feel proud that your child has such high standards and performs at such a high level.
- You are happy that your child spends a lot of time and energy trying to make things “just right”.

What to Do Instead?

- Have discussions around “being perfect”. Being perfect is not possible. We all make mistakes and this is how we learn and grow. It’s healthy to strive to do one’s best, but expectations need to be reasonable in order that one can bounce back from disappointments.
- Model healthy ways of handling mistakes: Laugh at yourself, say “Everyone makes mistakes sometimes”, comment on how you’ve learned from this mistake.
- Demonstrate how you trust others to do a good job vs. believing that you have to do everything yourself in order for it to be “just right”.
- If your child is spending excessive time on homework, doing things over and over again, set a boundary. Create a time-limit, remind your child that no-one is perfect, and to do the best he/she can. If the homework is not completed, communicate with the teacher that your child is showing signs of perfectionism and you had to create an end-point.

Mistake #7

Punishing Your Child

- Thinking that you can force your child to face his/her fears.
- Believing that “tough love” and strictness will cure your child of his/her anxiety.
- Increasing punishments, such as the withdrawal of privileges, as a way of externally controlling your child to make him/her get over this anxiety.
- Yelling at your child to make him/her see how irrational he/she is being.

What to Do Instead?

- Recognize that anxiety is not a choice. It is not a pleasurable experience and nobody wants to feel anxious.
- Anxiety is based on perceived fear - if you are yelling and threatening your child, your child’s fears will grow and you will increase your child’s anxiety. You need to create a supportive home environment to help lower the level of perceived fear and decrease the actual anxiety.
- You need to have a strong and loving connection with your child to show that you empathize and will be part of his/her team to conquer these worries.
- Decreasing anxiety takes time and usually includes the involvement of a licensed mental health professional who is trained in CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) to guide you.

Mistake #8

Not Recognizing the Early Signs of Anxiety

- **Rigidity** - Your child has a pattern of demanding that things be done only in a certain way.
- Your child usually imagines the worst case scenario.
- Your child asks a lot of “What if...?” questions which involve thinking of the worst.
- **High sensitivity and anxiety, commonly go together.** Does your child have high sensitivity with any of the five senses (*sock seams, tags on shirts, smells, textures of food, loud noises, bright lights, etc.*) or emotional sensitivity? Does he/she feel sad when others feel sad etc?

What to Do?

- **Shake it up!** Use humour to do things in a different order or a different way.
- In response to your child’s negative “What if?” ask a positive “What if?” to show a different perspective.
- Anxiety is not something that one can just “get over”. Anxiety gets bigger and bigger, if it is not addressed. The good news is that treatment through counselling, specifically CBT (*Cognitive Behavioural Therapy*), has a very high success rate for teaching anxiety management strategies.



This ebook was created by **Sharon Selby**, M.A. Registered Clinical Counsellor. If you found it helpful, please refer your friends & family to www.sharonelby.com for their free copy.



***Nothing diminishes anxiety
faster than action”***

~ Walter Anderson

Want To Take Further Action?

For 1:1 Counselling, child-centered play therapy, parent counselling or group counselling (*for children to learn anxiety management strategies and self-empowerment skills*) refer to my website: www.sharonelby.com under private practice, play therapy and/or groups.

For more information, please send an email through the “Contact Me” page on my website.

Thank you, and I wish you all the best on your parenting journey!

Warmly,



Sharon



“ Life is ten percent what you experience and ninety percent how you respond to it.”

~ Dorothy M. Neddermeyer