

Helping Parents Deal with Anxious Behaviors

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Introductions

- We are School Social Workers with Canyons School District and Private Practice Clinicians with Trails to Wellness Counseling Center. Part of our role with Canyons School District is teaching parenting classes to help parents work with their kids and teenagers with anxiety.
- In creating this presentation we have pulled information from a variety of evidence based sources including “Growing Up Brave”, CBT, Exposure, and SPACE trainings.

Objective

- To provide mental health professionals with information and strategies to help bridge the gap in services between clinicians and the parents of their youth clients and connecting with parents to support them in helping their child with anxious behaviors.

Our Why

- To create more awareness for parents on their roles in supporting their children with anxiety and to help them feel more empowered with tools, knowledge and skill sets.
- To help bridge the gap between child, therapist and parent to create more practice and consistency with tools that help children manage anxiety.

What we teach to Parents

- Relationship Building
- Psychoeducation
- Relaxation
- Cognitive Restructuring
- Exposure
- Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions

Relationship Building

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Parent and Child Interactive Therapy

- PCIT-Teach parents to set aside 5-10 minutes each day around the same time to connect with their child one on one without distractions in child directed play or child directed interactions
 - Teach parents during this time to offer praise, reflect what their child is saying/doing, provide genuine enthusiasm, imitate what child is doing, let the child lead activity without parent providing any feedback or demands.
 - Help parents understand how this builds relationships with their children and how this will help with their child manage their anxiety.
 - Provide parents example
 - [Video 3 How to Play in a Child Directed Way](#)

Do's & Don'ts

Don't ask a lot of questions

Do reflect back emotions

QUESTIONS AREN'T CONNECTIONS

QUESTIONS CAN *INCREASE*
ANXIETY FOR MANY KIDS.

instead, try statements that show you are interested and paying attention:

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- A diagram with two columns of text. The left column contains four questions, and the right column contains four statements. Hand-drawn arrows point from each question to a corresponding statement. The arrows are: a curved arrow from the first question to the first statement, a straight arrow from the second question to the second statement, a straight arrow from the third question to the third statement, and a wavy arrow from the fourth question to the fourth statement.
- How was school?
 - Did your test go ok?
 - Are you having fun?
 - Did you get along with other kids?
- You look like you've had a long day.
 - I was thinking about you during your math test.
 - Your smile is SO big!
 - I remember you were worried the other kids might not be friendly.. @LINDSAYBRAMAN

Protective and Demanding Statements

- Protecting(My job is to protect my child from harm)- My Child is not going to be able to handle this, Anxiety is going to hurt my child therefore I must protect them from their anxiety, my child is going to go to pieces if they do this.
- Demanding (My job is to promote independence)-My child should be able to do this, it is not scary at all, my child is just acting like a baby.

Acceptance and Validation + Confidence= Support

I see that this is hard for you and I am 100% sure that you can handle it

Protective and Demanding to Supportive Statements

You have to power through



It is hard and you have the power to get through

This is not easy



This is not easy and I know you will be okay

We know this is hard, we got you



We know this hard and you got this

Parent Challenge

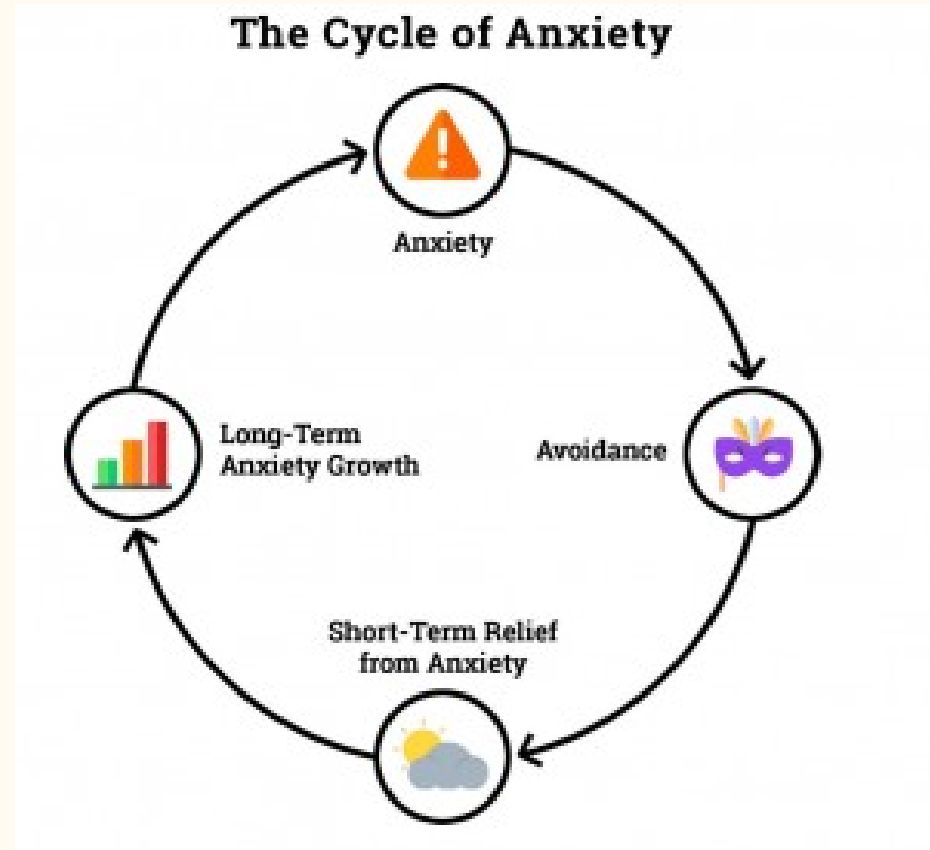
- After teaching parents about the importance of relationship building in the process of working with their child to manage anxiety we issue them the challenge of incorporating PCIT in their schedule and/or to start using supportive statements or reflective statements to help connect with their child.

Psychoeducation

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Cycle of Anxiety

- Anxiety-producing situation leads to uncomfortable symptoms such as worry, fear, a racing heart, sweating, or a feeling of being overwhelmed.
- Avoidance - Uncomfortable symptoms are controlled by avoiding the anxiety-producing situation.
- Short-Term Relief from Anxiety- avoidance of the anxiety-producing situation gives an immediate sense of relief. The symptoms of anxiety lessen, but only temporarily.
- Long-Term Anxiety Growth- The fear that initially led to avoidance worsens, and the brain learns that when the anxiety producing situation is avoided, the symptoms go away. As a result, the symptoms of anxiety will be worse the next time, and avoidance is more likely.



Safety Behaviors

- Psychoeducation

Safety behavior = behaviors used to cope with anxiety.

- Tend to be more maladaptive coping skills that increase anxiety.

Offer a sense of comfort and provide temporary relief from anxiety.

Reinforces the idea that the situation is dangerous.

Examples include the security of your cell phone (calling home to a parent, checking on a parents whereabouts), having someone with you/someone to rely on in social situations, “chill pass.”

- Provide parents with real life scenarios

- What Can Parents Do:

- Thought-changing skills
- Feeling-changing skills
- Behavior-changing skills.

Normal Development Stages

Preschoolers, Age 3 to 5

- Costumed characters, monsters, ghosts
- Fear of the dark & sleeping alone
- Other specific fears (dogs, water, insects, blood, the elevator)
- Separation Anxiety

Early School Age, Ages 6 to 10

- Social pressures
- Real world dangers
- Death in the family
- School failure

Middle School Age, Ages 10 to 13

- Social status
- Making and keeping friends, avoiding enemies
- Academic and athletic performance

Adolescence

- Sexuality and body image
- Social relationships
- The future, careers
- Moral issues

Red Flags for Anxiety

It's not necessarily the content of the fear or worry, but how extensively it's interfering with your child's functioning or affecting the atmosphere of family life.

- Intensity, frequency and interference matter.

It's appropriate to become concerned if:

- Worry lasts for months at a time, and is causing obvious physical distress, such as headaches, upset stomachs, nightmares and trouble going to sleep.
- Persistently refusing to go to school, or you learn of difficulty concentrating in the classroom.
- Seems unusually gloomy and pessimistic, and indulges in catastrophic thinking (it's going to be the end of the world.)
- Asks for a lot of reassurances (Am I going to be okay? When are you coming home? Will you go with me?)
- Becomes anxious or upset if reassurances are not coming.
- Persistently avoids participating in expected activities with peers.
- Excessively concerned about what others think.
- Becomes excessively self-critical; nothing is ever good enough.

** It's wise to become concerned if you realize you're spending more of your time and mental and emotional energy on any of these issues than simply enjoying and having fun with your child.

Parenting Styles

We then discuss how parenting styles can positively & negatively contribute to anxiety where current research points to inadvertently but adversely affecting a child's coping skills.

- Overparenting- too controlling in one way or another.
 - The too talkative parent - "let's talk it all out."
 - Intrusive - taking over and doing the task for your child.
 - Overly reassuring--"everything is going to be okay."
- Modeling anxious behaviors
 - Modeling behavior is one way we transmit fears and anxiety to our children. Our children are observing us all the time, not necessarily copying everything we do, but picking up impressions about how to approach the demands of the world.
 - The natural instinct of a parent with low distress tolerance might be to remove the child from all anxiety-provoking situations or from the prospect of failure. This increases avoidance behaviors in our children.
 - By taking care of stress in their child, parents can often avoid their own stress and anxiety.
 - Anxious parents tend to control more, and too much controlling results in higher levels of anxiety in children.

What is the Ideal Parenting Style?

Ideal parenting style is to be an “attentive parent.”

- Sensitive to a child’s temperamental inclinations and adjust protective and encouraging responses accordingly.
- Recognition of the difference between being an attentive parent and being a too vigilant, “too much” parent.
- It’s balancing several powerful emotions: your wish that your child have fun and make friends and enjoy being a kid, your protective instinct to ease fears and take away worries, and your desire to see your child succeed.
- Attentive parenting also relies on having boundaries and recognizing that sometimes we may need to give our children a little extra push.

Fight Flight and Freeze

- [Fight Flight Freeze – A Guide to Anxiety for Kids](#) [Flight Fight Freeze-Teenagers](#)
- Teach parents WHY it is helpful for children to understand the fight vs flight response, HOW it is activated and how it contributes to physical/physiological symptoms of anxiety.
 - Younger children don't have an awareness that anxiety is a normal human response. When experiencing physical/physiological symptoms (increased heart rate, panic attack, etc) these symptoms are perceived as dangerous and scary.
- Psychoeducation is needed so parents understand the importance of their child having the self-awareness and can understand WHY their body is reacting in this way.
- After developing an awareness of how the body responds to anxiety and when the fight vs flight response is activated we then move on to teach parents how to teach & model relaxation techniques to lessen these uncomfortable feelings.

Routines, Healthy Habits, and Setting Limits

Children/teens feel calmer when:

- Life is predictable
- Expectations are clear
- Consequences are immediate and consistent

Teaching parents the importance of setting a foundation for success by setting healthy habits, routines and setting limits. These include:

- Sleep Hygiene
 - Bedtime consistency
 - Bedtime environment
 - Bedtime rituals
 - Things to avoid before bed
- Homework Routine:
 - Down time & snack
 - Agree on post-homework activity
 - Timers
 - Small , manageable steps
 - Short breaks
- Physical Activity
 - Reduces stress & increases relaxation
- Morning/Bed time Routine
- Setting limits: T.V/Electronics, Play time, After school Activities
 - Ask your child to explain what is expected so you know they understand.
 - Remember to praise or reward your child when they meet that expectation.
 - Follow through with the consequence when the expectation is not met. *Every time.*

Parent Challenge

- After teaching parents about the cycle of anxiety, safety behaviors, parenting styles and the importance of healthy habits, routines and limits, we issue them the challenge of
 1. Noticing how the cycle of anxiety shows up in their child.

What are their safety behaviors?
 2. Implement/identify your current habits, routines & limits

What changes need to be made to make it more consistent, effective & healthy?

Relaxation Techniques

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Importance of Mindfulness

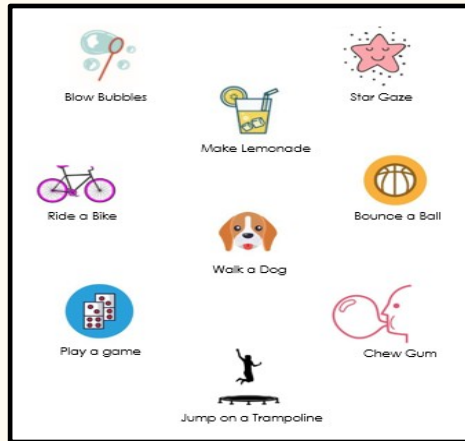
- BEING AWARE OF WHAT IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW
- HAVING PURPOSE IN WHAT YOU ARE DOING
- NOT JUDGING YOURSELF ON HOW YOU FEEL AND THINK
- NOT THINKING ABOUT THE PAST OR THE FUTURE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVWRvVH5gBQ>

- lessens anxiety and depression by keeping our thoughts in the NOW
- trains us to respond skillfully to what is happening NOW
- allows us to more fully enjoy each moment right NOW

Techniques to teach Parents

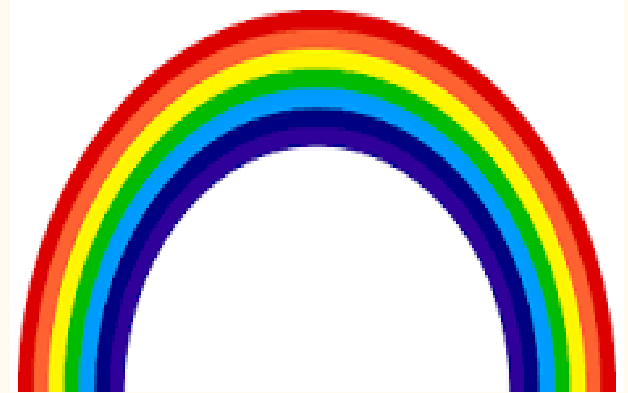
Self-Soothing



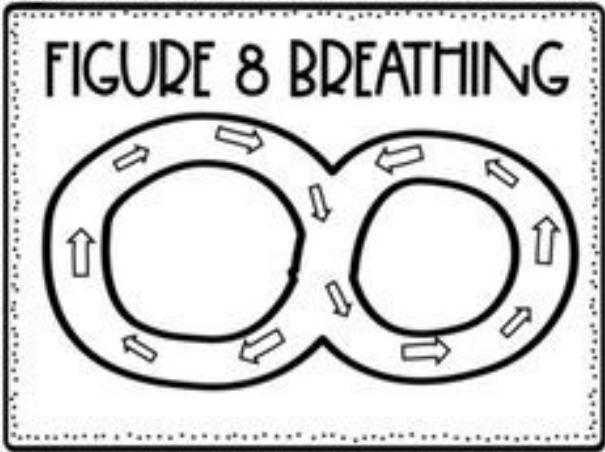
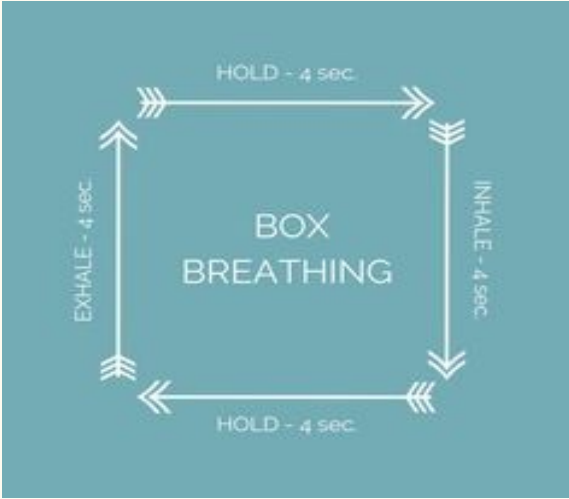
Grounding



HyperFocus



Deep Breathing



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Exercise that reduces stress and anxiety in your body by having you slowly tense and relax each muscle.
- Most children don't really know the difference between "this is how my body feels when it's tense or stressed" and "this is how my body feels when it's relaxed."
 - Practicing Progressive Muscle Relaxation allows a child to recognize the difference of tense vs. relaxed.
 - Tool that allows a child to feel in control.
 - Can be modified and practiced in different settings.
- [Progressive Muscle Relaxation for Kids](#) [Progressive Muscle Relaxation for teens/adults](#)

Parent Challenge

- Try a variety of relaxation techniques with your child to gauge which one your child likes best.

Cognitive Awareness and Restructuring

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Examining Anxious Thoughts

- Thoughts - Feelings- Behavior Model
 - Our thoughts are often what first triggers our anxiety.
 - Anxious children/adolescents become rigid in their way of thinking and interpret neutral situations as threatening.
 - When a situation is interpreted as dangerous our flight vs fight response is often triggered, which results in negative feelings/ physiological symptoms.
 - When negative symptoms are experienced in response to a stressful situation, avoidance typically follows as it alleviates the symptoms. This behavior reinforces the negative thoughts/interpretation of the situation.
 - The cycle of anxiety is maintained and reinforced.
- How do we stop this cycle ?
 - By reframing and changing our thought patterns.



How to teach parents about introducing Thoughts

- Before introducing cognitive restructuring skills, you may need to open a dialogue with your child about thoughts in general.
 - It may be hard for younger children (ages 7 and below) to say what they are thinking.
 - It is probably going to be more successful if you talk about feelings.
- Example
 - Use a visual aid - cut pictures of people's faces from a magazine that convey a certain feeling (happy, sad, scared).
 - Look at the pictures and determine what the emotion, or feeling is. Help your child out and provide them with a feeling if they have difficulty generating an emotion --this lady is smiling, she seems happy , this boy seems sad.
 - Parent then asks what do you think is going on with this lady who is happy and this boy who looks sad ?
 - Come up with a number of possibilities (he's sad because he broke his bicycle, he's sad because he misses his mommy, etc) and then tie the feeling to thoughts --there are many reasons one can be happy or sad and many thoughts that could lead to those emotions.

Cognitive Distortions

- Polarized Thinking
- Mental Filtering
- Overgeneralization
- Jumping to Conclusions
- Catastrophizing
- Personalization
- Blaming
- Labeling
- Always Being Right
- Should Statements
- Emotional Reasoning
- Control Fallacies
- Fallacy of Change
- Fallacy of Fairness
- Heaven Reward Fallacy

Thinking Errors

- **Binocular Vision:** Looking at things in a way that makes them seem bigger or smaller than they really are.
- **Black & White Thinking:** Looking at things in only extreme or opposite ways (for example, thinking of things as either bad or good, never or always, all or none)
- **Dark Glasses:** Thinking about only the negative parts of things.
- **Fortune Telling:** Making predictions about what will happen in the future without enough evidence.
- **Making it Personal:** Blaming yourself for things that are not your fault.
- **Blame Game:** Blaming others for things you should take responsibility for.

Binocular Vision

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Making It Personal

Blaming yourself for things that are not your fault or that you have no control over.



Blame Game

Blaming others for things you should take responsibility for.



Strategies to help kids

- Coping Cards
- Playing Detective
- Worry Logs
- Worry Pie

Helping Parents Understand

- Cognitive restructuring is not simply pulling out a negative thought and sticking in a happy one.
 - It is a process that requires time and practice, for both child and parent.
- It's natural and understandable instinct to tell our fearful child "That is not going to happen, you don't have to worry about that." Or "Let's think of something happier instead so you can forget about it."
 - Sometimes when we respond to our child like this, we think we can automatically change the way they perceive the situation, or bring them back to reality/help them "snap out of it."
- Changing thoughts takes time and empathetic understanding on a parent's behalf.
 - Parents often have to act as a coach in this situation and be mindful of their own thoughts and reactions.

Helping Parents Understand Cont.

- For most children, practicing thought-changing techniques when they're calm and focused is most successful.
 - In anxiety-provoking situations, emotions and the physiological response to anxiety are often heightened and practicing thought-changing techniques may not be possible in the moment.
 - A child may need to learn some relaxation techniques to use in the moment and once those have been implemented, thought-changing techniques during a stressful situation can be introduced.
 - A parent may need to initially act as a coach and remind their child to practice using their detective skills. This may be a gentle reminder to use these skills or actually asking them some detective questions.
- Practicing this technique is critical and will then become second nature.

How Parents can Model

Just talk out loud. Let your child hear a worry concern that's on your mind and then hear you restructure the thought. This models adaptive thinking.

Example: Suppose you and your family are driving to an appointment and you're running late, there doesn't seem to be any place to park the car. Voice your thoughts. "I'm worried we'll never find a parking spot. We'll be so late. But you know what I'm thinking now? It'll be fine. We might have to leave the car a few blocks away and walk. It won't be the worst thing in the world."

Parent Challenge

- Work with your child on being able to start examining thoughts.
- Model outloud to your child your own anxious thoughts and restructuring process.

Exposure

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Exposure Therapy

- A treatment used for helping people overcome phobias/fears that typically involves gradually decreasing the individual's irrational fear of an object or situation.
 - Essentially putting yourself in contact with the trigger, experience the anxiety and then preventing your avoidant response.
 - Large component of CBT Therapy.
- Exposure is controlled and gradual.
 - Child is encouraged to NOT avoid the thing she's afraid of, and to approach it in a controlled way.
 - She will experience the anxiety, but as she remains in the moment, it will begin to lessen.
 - Goal is to become habituated to the feeling and realize that is is normal and will not hurt her.
- Safety Behaviors
 - Safety items stay at home and are not used in exposure.
 - Safety behaviors gives a child the illusion that she's all right, she's safe, but it maintains anxiety because success is often attributed to the item.

Decreasing Negative Increasing Positive

- Reinforcement : any behavior that is paid attention to will increase;any behavior that is not paid attention to will decrease.
- Parental reinforcement has the potential to produce good and hoped-for results or not so good and undesirable results.
 - If you are paying a lot of attention to your child's anxious behaviors, you are reinforcing anxiety.
 - Attention also comes in various forms.
 - Examples
 - Dad reassures the girl who's fearful about a playdate or going to a birthday party that she can call anytime and they will pick her up and bring her home.
 - The boy in the classroom who is being disruptive is sent out of the class - he is getting what he wants.
- Differential Reinforcement - supporting the brave behavior and paying less attention to the nonbrave or avoidant behavior.
 - You are not turning away from your child in distress, you are just paying attention to a lot more of the positive stuff through noticing when a brave step is taken.
- Praise - make a big deal of small successes - " I can't get over how brave you are doing." " Your dad is going to be so proud of you."
 - Make is specific - tell your child exactly what they did that you liked.
 - Be careful not to insert a little negative after you have reinforced the positive - "you did so well getting dressed, it usually takes you longer."
- Rewards - also extremely effective in increasing the positive.
- Modeling positive behaviors - it's good to be aware of our own maladaptive behaviors and make adjustments.

Bravery Directed Learning

Bravery-Directed Learning: An interactive effort where your child will have his “homework”: Climbing the Bravery Ladder, and you will interact as a coach helping them develop their Bravery Ladder and rewarding their Bravery Ladder Learning. There are several ways in which parents will be an important part of it:

- Brainstorming
- Rewarding
- Helping motivate by creating opportunities
- Promoting practicing
- Meeting resistance

Building the Ladder

- With your child figure out which item or items you’d like to see him attempt.
- Create the ladder with the first/bottom step being an action you think your child can master.
- Come up with a list of sensible, gradual actions. Most bravery Ladders include 8-10 items. Each will be specific and detailed. (SMART goal oriented)
- Have a space next to it for a rewarding sticker or a big check mark . (Although family attention and praise is the real motivator.)

Meeting Resistance

What do you do if your child panics in a planned situation? Do you encourage them to stay or do you leave?

- Wait it out until the child's anxiety has come down. Then with labeled praise, maximize that accomplishment as a successful step.
- Use tangible reinforcers-stickers, small treats, used heavily in the beginning-can help them feel more game to the idea.
- Ease the pressure. Child is stuck in the bravery ladder process and cannot go to the sleepover, then change the circumstances and have her spend the night at Grandmas.

Ask yourself, why is the child not motivated to get better? What is the function of their behavior? What might your child gain by being afraid?

- Staying home from school means I get to play video games. If I get better I won't get so much attention. If I stop sleeping with my parents they'll get divorced.

Parent Challenge

- Creating a Bravery Ladder with your child and provide them with opportunities to practice.

Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions

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Changing Parents Behaviors



Increase Support

- Acceptance/Validation + Confidence = Support
- Protecting & Demanding vs Supportive statements
- Recruiting Supporters



Decrease Accommodation

- Recognizing boundaries
- Charting accommodations
- Choosing a target
- Making a plan
- Informing the child

Why parents?

- Psychoeducation about anxiety
- Systematic nature of anxiety
- Avoid parent blame
- Self-control instead of controlling child behavior
- Unilateral steps

Removing Accommodations/Choosing Target Problem

Teaching parents to recognize what boundaries are being crossed and what accommodations are maintaining/increasing the anxiety. Ask parents to answer these questions when deciding if it's an accommodation:

1. Is it a parent behavior?
2. Is it developmentally appropriate?
3. What is the parent's motivation?
4. Would parents be doing this if the child weren't anxious?
5. Are they doing the same with other children?
6. What happens if they don't do it?

Parents are then asked to choose a target problem by referring to their list of accommodations. When choosing their first target they should consider the following:

1. Meaningful/significant problem
2. Recurring & frequent
3. Anxiety related
4. Parent's motivation
5. It's an accommodation!

Making a Plan & Informing the Child

Making a plan - detailed and specific!

- What will we do
- When will we do it
- Who will do it
- What will we do instead
- How much / how many times
- How will we cope with child reactions
- Engaging supporters

Informing the child - Style

- An announcement – not a negotiation or a contract
- Brief
- Supportive
- Specific
- Parent focused
- Developmentally appropriate (will the child understand it?)

Making a Plan & Informing the Child

Informing the child - Content

1. Positive opening statement (e.g., We love you very much; You're a great kid etc.)
2. Supportive statement about anxiety problem (e.g., We know how hard it is for you when...We believe you can handle it)
3. Acknowledgement that accommodation is not the solution (e.g., We realize we have not been helping you by...)
4. Explanation of plan (e.g., From now on we will...)
5. Supportive statement about plan (e.g., We realize this will be difficult...we know you can handle it)
 - Optional: explicit statement that the plan is not a punishment (e.g., We are not doing this to punish you; You have not done anything wrong)
 - Optional: "We will get help from any one who can help us"
6. Positive closing statement (e.g., We love you, mom and dad)

Summary

- Hopefully you are able to pull some information from this presentation in your work with parents and youth. Below are the 6 topics we build upon to provide parents with an overview of working with anxiety.
 - Relationship Building
 - Psychoeducation
 - Relaxation
 - Cognitive Restructuring
 - Exposure
 - Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions

Questions

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