

Moving From Enabling to Challenging Anxiety: Addressing Accommodation

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All parents aim to support their children in becoming resilient individuals who can persist in the face of a challenge or adversity. However, a very serious threat to building that resilience is anxiety. Anxiety is a very real struggle and ignoring it can just make it snowball. While we don't expect (or want) to eliminate anxiety altogether, we do want to find ways to manage it. Typically, accommodations for attentional and learning challenges allow individuals to perform to the best of their ability. But accommodating anxiety has the opposite effect. Therefore, other strategies need to be considered.

It is important for parents to be aware of the signs of anxiety in their child and to provide a safe environment for them to express their thoughts and emotions. Yet some strategies they may be using can make anxiety worse through accommodation. Family accommodation is a term often used to refer to how parents and families modify their own behaviors to help children lessen the anxiety they may experience or either avoid anxiety altogether. But when anxiety is enabled, it continues to persist. The following are some ways that anxiety is commonly accommodated:

- By providing an “out” right away (E.g., “Go to school and if you’re not feeling well by lunch time, you can text me and I will come pick you up.”)
 - Once avoidance is an option, anxiety will pick avoidance and likely not give the situation or task a chance.
- By engaging in rituals that prolong goodbyes (E.g., “Three hugs before going into the school” or “I’ll come stand in line with you until the bell rings”)
 - This increases anticipation about the worry. Self-awareness on the parents’ part also plays a significant role. Children learn how to react or feel in new situations by observing their parents’ reactions and emotions. For example, if a child observes their parent(s) looking concerned or upset on their first day of school, they may get the message that this situation is something to be worried or sad about. Rather, a short and sweet goodbye will suffice.
- By providing guarantees (E.g., “Don’t worry, you’ll have a great day at school!”)
 - While this can bring short-term relief, there is no way to guarantee that the day will go well. Instead, it is important to acknowledge that it is possible to have a bad day. And remind your child that regardless of whether they may have a bad day or a good day, they will survive and that they’ll be able to come home after and share their day with you! And that the next day may be better.

- By engaging in rationalization (E.g. “What are the chances someone will break in when we are asleep?”)
 - Engaging in the content of the worry and trying to rationalize with a child will likely not help. This is because anxiety is not rational! Therefore, a back-and-forth conversation about the source of the worry can be feeding the anxiety because that’s what the anxiety wants – all the attention. Rumination can further grow anxiety, which is the opposite of what we want.
 - Instead of spending time convincing a child that their worry is irrational or continuously reassuring them, it may be more effective to talk about a situation where they were successful and how they felt before, during, and after the situation.
- By providing frequent check-ins (E.g. “Are you sure you’re ok?”)
 - While it can be good to have check-ins, too many check-ins can actually induce feelings of anxiety! This may send the message that a particular situation should be evoking a negative emotional response. Therefore, unless there are visible signs of distress (that warrants a check-in), the child may overcome this discomfort on their own.

How do we challenge anxiety?

Managing anxiety is certainly no easy feat. It is understandable that parents do not want to see their child experiencing discomfort or in distress. But to build resilience, we need to become comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Each situation should be thought of as a learning opportunity. When an adult does something for the child that he/she is afraid of doing (due to fear of failure or other worries), this sends the message that they need that support and that the adult does not believe that they can do the task independently. An alternative response could be to wait and let them be uncomfortable to start building that tolerance to discomfort. This sends the message that you believe that they will eventually be able to conquer their fears. For example, if a child has difficulty speaking to strangers, it would be beneficial to allow them to be uncomfortable in that situation instead of answering for them right away. As a parent, you can provide words of encouragement to let your child know that they can do it. This sends the message that you believe that they will overcome this challenge. After they do so, they will consequently feel a sense of achievement. This is where you can acknowledge their effort and celebrate this step together! When trusting adults are confident in a child’s ability, the child will likely be more confident in themselves. This also increases their self-esteem and self-confidence when handling stressful situations.

However, it is important to understand that the goal is not to completely get rid of anxiety, but to manage it. A key component of this is the normalization of mistakes. This understanding requires the acknowledgement that there are no guarantees and that things will not be perfect. And that it is okay! This will hopefully reduce some of the pressure the child is feeling by recognizing that regardless of an outcome, they will remain resilient. That doesn't mean that we want to drop a child into the deep end without support. It is important to model and coach a child through some of these uncomfortable challenges. Some ways this can be done is by narrating yourself going through a challenging situation by sharing what you're initially feeling, persisting through the challenge, and finally, sharing feelings of accomplishment. This shows them an example of how anxious worries and situations can be dealt with in a constructive manner. Coaching allows parents to guide their child through this process until they are able to do it independently.

To summarize, it is important to be aware of the ways anxiety may be accommodated to put a stop to them. This is because accommodation of anxiety leads to persistence of anxiety. A crucial component of managing anxiety is building tolerance by normalizing uncertainty. This is done by increasing a child's belief in their own ability to figure something out, helping them learn what to do when things don't work out, and encouraging them to know that they can handle it if something doesn't go well. This requires patience and persistence, and real-life situations are great learning opportunities to build their confidence. The following resources provide additional strategies to continue moving from enabling anxiety to challenging it:

- *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous and Independent Children* by Reid Wilson and Lynn Lyons
- *Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD: A Scientifically Proven Program for Parents* by Dr. Eli Lebowitz
- *The Resilience Recipe: A Parent's Guide to Raising Fearless Kids in the Age of Anxiety* by Drs. Muniya Khanna and Philip Kendall
- *Anxious Kids: How children can turn their anxiety into resilience* by Michael Grose and Dr. Jodi Richardson
- Anxiety Canada website: <https://www.anxietycanada.com/>