

Working with Parents of Anxious Kids: What Every Therapist Should Know

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Goals for Today

- How to think more broadly about working with families of anxious kids
- Learn how to focus on family values in treatment
- Specifically consider the role of development in treating anxious kids
- Discuss strategies to enhance relationships between parents and children to help child anxiety
- Help parents focus specifically on independence



Understanding Child Anxiety and OCD

- Problematic anxiety doesn't go away with time without help
- ... and doesn't really “go away” because anxiety is a normal human emotion
- We tackle anxiety by teaching kids to cope
- Verbal exchange between adults and children to change anxiety doesn't work, but behavioral experience does
 - (Kendall, 2019)



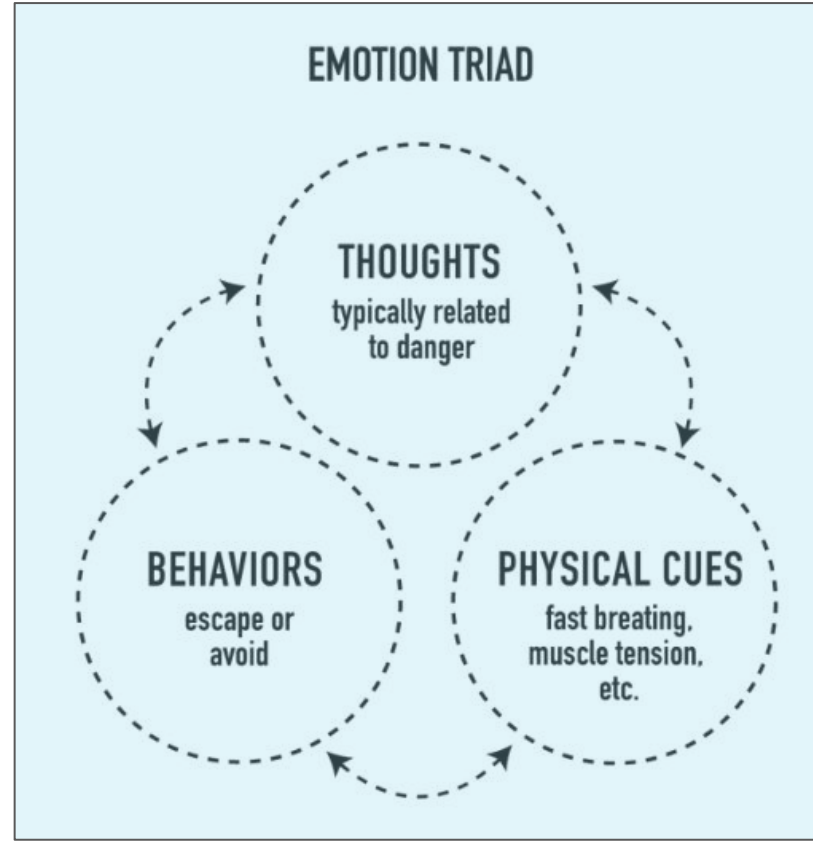
Treatment Components for Children : Technicalities

- A solid relationship (necessary, but not sufficient)
 - One that involves collaboration
 - Active child involvement is a predictor of outcome

- Homework / Home practice

Treatment Components for Children

- Psychoeducation related to emotions
- Some interventions related to thoughts/ self talk
 - Awareness of thoughts
 - Coping statements
 - Cognitive restructuring
 - Defusion
- Body strategies
 - Relaxation (or not, Bilek, 2022)
 - Mindfulness
- EXPOSURES



Why Include Parents in Therapy?

Developmentally, might be necessary to have parents as coaches

- Can shape treatment
- Ensure adherence
- Motivation outside session

To directly addresses parental behaviors

- Specifically, consider Exposure as a “wrap around” technique to help parents cope (Freeman, Garcia, et al 2008).

Sometimes, parents are the primary therapy target

- Practical reasons: other children in the family, scheduling
- Parents can be the “first line” of prevention for anxiety



Where Traditional Therapy Falls Short:

- Historically, therapy is conceptualized as a 1:1 relationship between a therapist and patient
 - Some exceptions (couples, families)



- CBT has done an inconsistent job with discussing the role of families
- What our families need doesn't always fit into the “therapy hour”

****We need to think broader to help families****

- Multiple options to involve parents, none of them are wrong

Therapeutic Programs Involving Parents

SPACE Program (Lebowitz et al., 2014)	Focuses solely on parent change by targeting accommodation
Family Based CBT (Freeman et al., 2003)	Parents learn differential attention, modeling, scaffolding Families work together to develop a hierarchy and implement Exposure and Response Prevention
Unified Protocol – Child/ Adolescent (Ehrenreich-May et al., 2017)	Transdiagnostic, focus on internalizing disorders Parallel parent and child sessions
Parent Coached Exposure Therapy (PCET; Whiteside, Biggs, & Ollendick 2020)	Parents learn to walk children through exposures

Some Clinical Considerations:

- Do parents have buy in?

- Setting the tone: we're not dry cleaners
- How do you set the expectations so that parents are not afterthoughts?

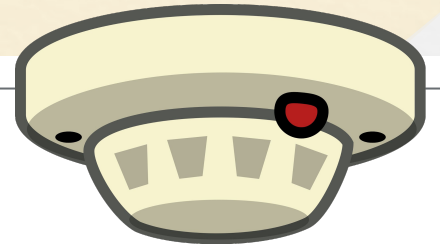
- Things to consider and assess for:

- What is the parent currently doing?
- What is the parent capable of doing?

Will involvement help or hurt?

- Age of child
- Parent anxiety
 - Family distress and dysfunction is a moderator of treatment outcome
 - Presence of a parent with an anxiety disorder (depleted gains at 1 year follow up)

Anxiety Psychoeducation:



1. Anxiety is normal response to threat
 - Sometimes a “false alarm,” like a smoke alarm
 - Emotions aren’t the problem, reactions to them are
2. When kids feel anxious, parents often feel anxious
 - Parents who are anxious aren’t at their best
3. Parents have a strong urge to protect their children
 - This backfires with anxiety, so parents either over-protect or minimize a child’s emotions

Anxiety is NOT a problem to be fixed

How might parents contribute to child anxiety?

Parents bring their own risks and vulnerabilities to their parenting - that's just life!

(Ehrenreich-May et al., 2017)

HOW PARENTS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO CHILD ANXIETY	HOW PARENTS CAN HELP
Intolerance of negative emotion "You're fine, don't cry"	Help kids talk about emotion "That looks like it really hurt. It's okay to be sad."
Avoiding risk "Your best friend isn't going to the party, so maybe you should stay home."	Help kids take risk "It's hard to do things without your best friend, but I know you can."
Inconsistency Sometimes your child is allowed to sleep in your bed; sometimes they aren't	Setting routines Having a set bedtime and sleep routine
Accommodation "Taking the bus to school makes you anxious, so I'll drive you."	Cutting out avoidance "I know you can handle the bus ride, so I'm not going to drive you."
Modeling anxious behaviors "I'm just going to text Mom again to make sure she's okay. She's five minutes late."	Modeling coping behaviors "Mom's a little late. Maybe she hit traffic."

Informal Assessment/ Psychoed

- What is your parenting style? (authoritarian, authoritative, permissive)
 - Ideal vs reality
- Where did you learn your parenting?
- Who does the parenting in your home?
- What are your parenting values?

(Baumrind 1971)

I know best regarding what is best for my children.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

My children should run all major decisions by me.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I believe that children should be criticized when
they make mistakes.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I yell at my child when they make mistakes.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I punish my child by removing privileges.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I remind my child that I am his or her parent.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

TOTAL AUTHORITARIAN SCORE (MAX TOTAL:40):

PERMISSIVE

Kids will be kids—you can't really expect them to do
any more than that.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

Having a solid friendship with my child is the most
important part of parenting.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I often say that I'm going to punish my child but rarely
follow through.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I take my child's preferences into account when making
family plans.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I remind my children of all the things I've done for them.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I give in when my child causes a fuss.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I spoil my child.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I find it difficult to discipline my child.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

TOTAL PERMISSIVE SCORE (MAX TOTAL:40):

AUTHORITATIVE

My kids deserve an equal say to me in making choices
that involve them.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I take my child's wishes into consideration when I make
decisions for them.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I encourage my children to voice their opinion, even if
they disagree with me.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I comfort my child when they're upset.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

I validate my children's feelings.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤



Consider Parenting Values

- Values are active, and they direct our goals and behaviors.
- Some exercises to identify what's important to you:
 - **“Meaningful moment” exercise:** What's a salient moment that that you've had with your children? It doesn't have to be very big.
 - **How do you want your kids to remember you?**
 - **Values card sorts**
- *Anxiety often gets in the way of these values*

Values and Goals

- Are parents parenting in line with their values?
 - Help parents connect the dots between what they're doing and what they want to be doing
 - Identify small, values related, goals.

VALUE	CURRENT BEHAVIOR	GOAL
Ex: Honesty	Slinking out of the house or telling my child "I'm only going out for a minute" to avoid a meltdown.	To tell my child where I'm going when I leave the house.
Ex: Caring	Yelling at my child when they're having an anxiety meltdown.	To validate my child's feelings instead.
Value 1:	Current Behavior 1:	Goal 1:
Value 2:	Current Behavior 2:	Goal 2:
Value 3:	Current Behavior 2:	Goal 3:

Taking a Developmental Perspective to Anxiety

- **Toddlers:** loud noises



- **Preschool:** monsters, dragons



- **Elementary:** realistic fears, storms, physical injury



- **Tweens/Teens:** social fears



- **Emerging adults:** achieving independence



Developmental Expectations by Age

Stage	Expectations	Challenges
Toddlers (1-3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Emotional Displays● Behavioral Reactions● Separation and stranger anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Getting comfortable with new adults● Peer interactions (parallel play moves to cooperative play)
Preschoolers (age 3-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Increased pretend play/imagination● Concrete thinking● Physical Symptoms● Possible behavioral problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Separation worries● Starting school● Social world continues to expand
School Age (age 5-10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Fears become more realistic● School concerns● Increased cognitive abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Navigating peer relationships● Managing academics

Stage	Expectations	Challenges
Middle School (11-14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Concerns about peers and performance (over family) ● Concerns about judgment of others ● Physical and hormonal changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Moving towards more responsibility ● More social independence
High School (14-17)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased independence ● Romantic relationships ● Physical and emotional changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Decision making and problem solving (social, academic, life) ● Navigating social situations ● Emotion regulation and self soothing ● Realistic thinking and flexibility
Emerging Adults (18-23)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emerging adulthood (freedom with few responsibilities) ● Fostering an independent identity ● Risk taking behavior ● Autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identity development ● Achieving independence

Thinking Developmentally to Involve Parents

- How old are your patients?

- Under 8ish: using PCIT skills to promote exposures

- PCIT CALM or a dyad-focused approach

- 8–12:

- Involving parents in psychoeducation at minimum

- Consider parallel parent sessions / family sessions

- If kids refuse treatment, or accommodation is highly prevalent,, consider a parent approach (SPACE)

- Teens:

- Moving towards independence: treating the patient as such

- BUT: helping parents understand their role in supporting a teen through exposures



Concepts for Parents in Managing Child Anxiety:

- 1.** Build and maintain a strong relationship with a child
- 2.** Teach parents not to be complicit with a child's anxiety (Exposure-mindset parenting)
- 3.** Teach parents to actively help child build independence and face their fears

Relationship Building: Lessons from PCIT

- “Special Time” – 5 minutes of undivided attention, 1:1 playtime with your child
 - Follow the child’s lead
- Use relationship enhancement techniques (PRIDE skills)
- Differential Attention
- Limit Setting



PRIDE Skills

- Praise (always specific, preferably for brave behavior related to exposure)
- Reflection
 - Repeating or paraphrasing APPROACH talk or BRAVE talk
- Imitation
 - Do the step with your child
- Descriptions (of the child's appropriate, brave behavior)
 - Be the sports announcer
- Enjoy: Be enthusiastic, supportive, warm
 - Rather than: "you took this one tiny little step and maybe you'll be normal in a year"

Avoid:

- Questions
- Commands
- Criticism

*nothing is as validating as parental attention in young children



Differential Attention

- Have parents identify problems, and consider what is the **OPPOSITE** of the behavior I'm trying to change?
 - Doing homework on time, taking out homework right away
- **PRAISE** any steps towards the wanted behavior
 - Help parents remember that messy coping is still coping
- Differential attention is an **ACTIVE** parenting technique.
- Use your attention to promote **BRAVE** behaviors and **IGNORE** whining, crying, and avoid behaviors
 - You're so **BRAVE** that you took the bus to school
 - I'm so proud that you stayed here while I went for a walk
 -

Use the “special time” skills:

- Labeled Praise
- Descriptions

*This is easy to explain but hard to teach.

*validating emotions
= validating children

Help Parents Label Emotions

- Naming emotions helps with emotional processing
 - Teach parents to label their own emotions
 - Help parents label their child's emotions
- For younger kids
 - Play emotion charades or games
- Expect pushback from parents



**How can emotion talk become part of parenting irrespective of a specific concern?

Teach Parents to Validate

Techniques:

- Reflect what a child is saying
- Listen without problem solving or judgment
- Find the “kernel of truth” in what the child is saying
- Avoid the “buts”

PRACTICE and role play in session,
even if it's awkward



Teach Parents to Use “Supportive Language” When a Child is Anxious



Validate

“I know it’s hard when you have to...”

Notice and name the emotion

Express Confidence

“I know you can do it”

Be specific



- Teach parents to use support statements one time per event rather than turn this to unhelpful reassurance
- Avoid being overly accommodating or minimizing of emotional experiences

Teach Parents to Model

- How do parents cope with their own emotions?
 - In session
 - At home
- Model what you want parents to do in session
 - Make sure they're actively participating, praising their child
 - Praise them for supporting their child
 - Gently correct them for inappropriate behavior
 - Point out reassurance, criticism
 - Point out when they focus on a negative rather than a positive behavior
- Be transparent: make sure EVERYONE knows therapy goals
- Don't be afraid of parents.
 - Everyone needs to learn to act Brave!



Reduce Accommodation

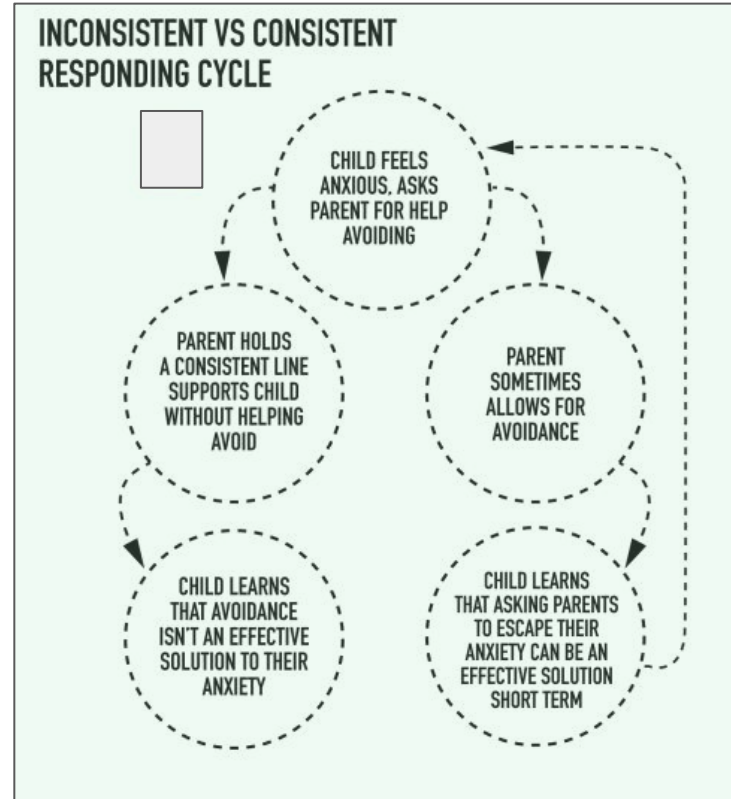
- What am I doing in the service of my child's anxiety?
- Includes changes that parents or siblings make to their own behaviors aimed at reducing a child's anxiety
 - Reassurance
 - Participating in anxiety rituals
 - Providing items needed for compulsions (extra toilet paper, soap)
 - Modifying your schedules
 - Changing family routine to minimize a child's distress

How I Accommodate My Child

Morning Routine	Any accommodations for my child's anxiety?
Wake up	
Getting dressed	
Breakfast	
Getting to school/ day care	
Daytime	Any accommodations for my child's anxiety?
Drop-off at school	
During the school day	
Lunch/snacks	
Pickup from school	
After School	Any accommodations for my child's anxiety?
Homework	
Leisure Time	
Responsibilities	
Dinner	

Help Parents Consider their Boundaries

- Talk about discipline and when to use it.
 - “Fight or Flight” Response includes fighting
- Ask parents about their “red lines”
 - What are they and how do you enforce them?
 - Encourage parents to be specific rather than general
 - Think about good discipline rules
 - Predictable
 - Consistent
 - Follow through
- Inconsistency makes anxiety worse while good boundaries can help a child with anxiety
 - Fuzzy boundaries often maintain anxiety



Teach Parents to do Exposure

- Parents should have homework too!
 - o Can be integrated into a child's anxiety hierarchy or can be separate
- Hierarchies may be focused on:
 - o Accommodation (What can I reduce without asking anything of my child?)
 - o Exposure (what can I push my child to do?)
 - o Developmental hierarchies (what independence or milestone based activity can I work on?)
- Include incentives

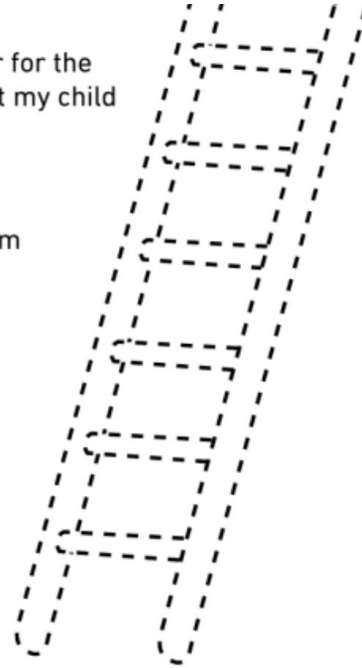
DIFFICULTY 10: Only cooking one dinner for the family that includes something that my child generally eats

DIFFICULTY 9: Not picking my child up from school instead of sending them on the bus

DIFFICULTY 7: Leaving my child's bedroom after sitting with him for 10 minutes

DIFFICULTY 5: Answering reassurance questions one time only

DIFFICULTY 3: Only picking up once an hour when my child calls



Using Rewards

- Be specific
- Make them small and frequent
 - Or, use stand ins for a larger reward
- Talk to parents about reinforcement directly
 - Sometimes, parents have difficulty understanding the rationale for rewarding a child for what they should be doing
- Discuss that rewards are for actions, not feelings



Focus on Emotional Milestones and Increased Independence

Independence Skills for Emerging Adults

- Why independence?
 - Anxiety impacts development
 - Often leads to lags in areas outside of anxiety
- Parents need to focus on helping kids meet their developmental milestones
 - What is the teen not doing that they should be doing independently because of their anxiety?
 - Use scaffolding to get to goals

Focusing on independence alone can impact anxiety (Ortiz & Fastman, 2023)

To make and manage therapy appointments	To shop for own clothing	To manage their own haircuts	To stay within budget
To makes social plans	To do his/her own laundry	To dress themselves	To manage grooming activities like showering
To take medications independently	To manage prescriptions and refills	To register for their own classes	To communicate with professors on his/her own
To resolve conflicts with friends	To travel locally on own	To answer texts and emails	

Help Parents Find the Gaps

- Identify the milestone
- Teach the skill
- Set the expectation
- Use logical consequences when necessary
- Scaffold

Developmental Milestones for Teens and Young Adults

DOMAIN	WHAT DOES MY CHILD DO NOW?	WHAT DO I WANT MY CHILD TO DO?
FINANCES		
My teen can budget.		
My teen saves up for what they want.		
My teen can buy and pay for things appropriately.		
SCHOOL RELATED		
My teen does his or her homework (mostly) independently.		
My teen manages their own workflow.		
My teen keeps track of their exam/ homework deadlines.		
SLEEP		
My teen wakes up by themselves.		
My teen recognizes how much sleep he or she needs and manages their time accordingly.		

STEPS TO INDEPENDENCE

BUILDING: LAUNDRY

EXAMPLE

STEP 5: Child washes, dries, and folds laundry independently.

STEP 4: Child washes and dries clothing; parent folds clothing.

STEP 3: Child starts the wash; parent moves laundry to dryer and dries clothing.

STEP 2: Child sorts laundry independently; parent does wash.

STEP 1: Child brings laundry to laundry room by themselves; parent does laundry.

Let's Review Our Goals

- How to think more broadly about working with families of anxious kids
- Learn how to focus on family values in treatment
- Specifically consider the role of development in treating anxious kids
- Discuss strategies to enhance relationships between parents and children to help child anxiety
- Help parents focus specifically on independence

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