

Six ways good parents contribute to their child's anxiety

By Karen Banes



Kids have it hard these days.

It doesn't seem like it when they're playing on their \$500 tech gadgets, but they do. Twenty-first century living is taking its toll, and many kids are finding it hard to cope.

The number of children dealing with anxiety has been increasing steadily for decades, with up to 25 per cent of teenagers now suffering from diagnosable anxiety disorders.

I know as a parent I can be part of the problem or part of the solution. And more often than I care to admit, I'm in the wrong camp.

Your child's anxiety is not your fault, but it's possible that some of the parenting practices you're most proud of are actually making things worse.

1. Caring too much

When your child comes home from school with tales of mean girls, aggressive boys and insensitive teachers, you feel for her, and often you let it show, but maybe you shouldn't.

Our kids feed off our emotions and get more distressed when we're distressed. When my daughter communicates her worries to me, only to have me start worrying too, it definitely

makes things worse. She needs me to be strong, but instead I inadvertently send the message that anxiety is the "right" reaction to her problems.

Difficult though it is, we need to keep our own anxiety in check while sympathising with theirs. We have to be the emotional rock: the person who understands, supports and (if asked) advises, without ever showing that their problems make us feel anxious too.

2. Advocating too hard

We all want to stand up for our kids, but our eagerness to advocate can sometimes actually raise anxiety levels.

If your child shares a school problem with you, your first instinct is often to march into the school and try and resolve it. This tells your child two things. Firstly he can't tell you something in confidence, and secondly you don't have faith in him to fix his own problems.

Make sure your children know you will only advocate on their behalf with their full knowledge and consent. Your first priority should be to help them find a solution they can implement without your help, every time.

3. Compensating for weaknesses

We all want to help our children with the things they struggle with. One bad grade in math and we engage a tutor. One issue with a bully and we buy them a book about dealing with bullies.

Unintentionally, though, we're encouraging them to focus on the negative. Most of us get our confidence not from compensating for weaknesses, but on playing to our strengths. Those of us who are truly happy with our adult lives have learned to do the things we're good at and not stress about the rest. We probably delegate or outsource the things we're really bad at.

Children can't always avoid their weak areas, but by focusing on strengths we build self-efficacy and confidence. Next time you're tempted to spend the weekend researching math tutors because your child is doing poorly in math, consider instead spending all weekend doing things he's good at. His sense of confidence and competence will return. It may even carry over to his next math class.

4. Overplaying strengths

Yes, I know I just said focus on strengths, and we totally should. Just not to the point that our expectations cause more anxiety. When you constantly tell people your son is on track for a top college, or your daughter is going to be an Olympic gymnast, you feel like you're building them up, but eventually the positive affirmation turns to pressure.

Compliment your kids when they excel, but don't make their excellence a reason to expect even more from them. Overly high expectations can create performance anxiety where there used to be joy and personal fulfillment.

5. Having great values

You've probably worked hard to encourage good values in your children, but values get challenged and being too attached to yours could mean your child obsesses over them.

There's been more than one tragic case of young people committing suicide over incidents that should never have led to a loss of life. From posting nude photos to watching pornography, sometimes kids make poor choices, and the thought of family finding out can seem like a fate worse than death.

Let your children know that while values are important, you understand the realities and temptations they face. Don't create a culture where your children are too anxious to come to you and admit they messed up, or are under pressure to mess up, because they fear you'll judge them or their friends.

6. Hiding your troubles

We all like to protect our children from anxiety by not worrying them with our own issues. If we're struggling financially or fighting with our spouse, we think our children are better off not knowing. But they do know. They're super perceptive. They just don't know the whole story, so they blow it out of all proportion, especially if they're already suffering from anxiety.

Should we pile our own troubles on our child's shoulders? No, but it doesn't hurt to be honest about what our concerns are and, more importantly, what we're doing about it. By sharing what makes us anxious and how we deal with it, we're modelling practical ways to resolve anxiety.

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