

Anxiety: **How to Help Your Child Cope with Stress**



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Katherine Dahlsgaard, Ph.D.

Lead Psychologist

ABC: The Anxiety Behaviors Clinic

Director: The Picky Eaters Clinic

Department of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry &
Behavioral Sciences

Conflicts of Interest/Disclosures



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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FEAR & ANXIETY?

FEAR

- **Body** gets ready to fight off threat: Heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, rush of blood to large muscles, sweating, dry mouth
- **Thoughts** are catastrophic:
 - I'll never get out of here!
 - I'm gonna die!
- **Behavior:** All about escape
- **Possible outcome?** Disfiguring burns/unendurable pain / death



ANXIETY

- **Body** gets ready to fight off threat: Heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, rush of blood to large muscles, sweating, dry mouth
- **Thoughts** are catastrophic:
 - I'll say something stupid!
 - They will notice that my hands are trembling!
 - Kids will laugh at me!
- **Behavior:** All about escape
- **Possible outcome?** Embarrassment



Normal Anxiety

vs.

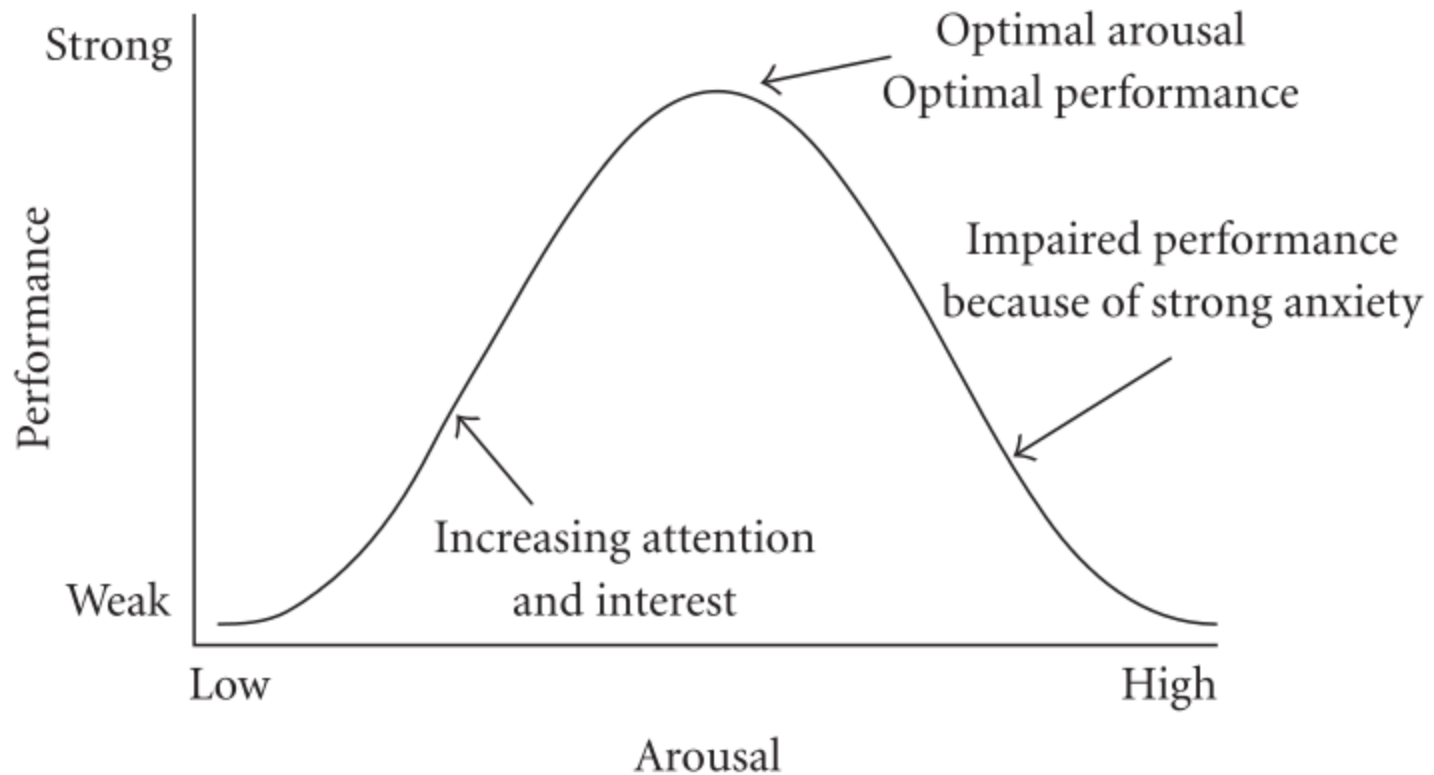
Excessive Anxiety



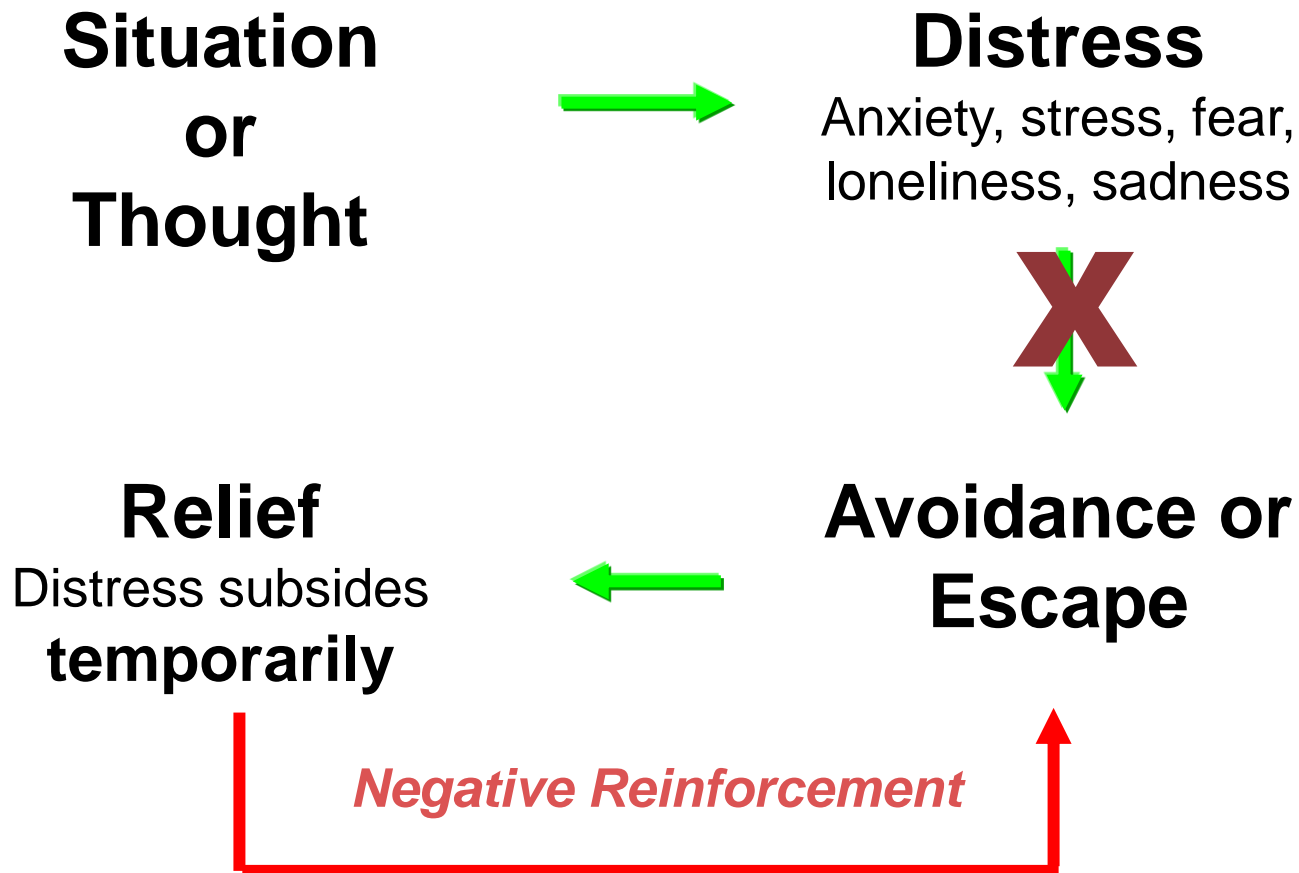
- **All children experience anxiety**
- Anxiety represents emerging abilities and is **adaptive**
- Typical anxiety: separation from parents, strangers, the dark, doing well academically, making new friends, saying the right thing in classes, doing well with sports
- For the typical child, it tends to be mild, fluctuate in response to stress, & transitory.
- Mild - moderate anxiety helps us to perform better!

- **By contrast, excessive anxiety**:
 - Is developmentally inappropriate
 - Is not transient: it persists over an extended period of time
 - Is **unadaptive** – interferes with meeting developmental tasks
 - Doesn't fluctuate as much in response to stress – it is chronic
 - Tends to interfere with performance

Yerkes-Dodson Curve



What maintains anxiety?



Your job as a parent....



- Is not to ***rescue*** your child from feeling distress
- Is not to ***prevent*** your child from feeling distress
- Rather, your job is to model, teach, and support your child in ***active coping skills***





Coping with Stress:

The Guidelines

What can parents do?



The following are good strategies to model, teach, and practice at home.

They are good strategies to share with teachers and adopt at school, where appropriate and feasible.

The Guidelines



#1 “Learn to tolerate your child’s distress, or your child never will.”*

- The child needs the chance to learn that painful emotions
 - are a normal part of life
 - are temporary
 - can be endured
 - do NOT preclude functioning

Avoid...

Rescuing the child from temporary distress.

Instead....

- Normalize / empathize – *“I get it that you are feeling scared”* said with REAL compassion.
- **But help child build resilience**









“I can’t go to school today...”



Suggestions to parents (and school personnel):

1. Child must attend school unless s/he has a fever or diarrhea
2. Visits to nurse’s office kept short
3. Limit length of calls; don’t answer texts until a certain time
4. Have parent, child, and school personnel “contract” to the coping plan and stick to it; no bargaining or negotiations (i.e., *compassionate, but firm*)
5. Have a check-off sheet for the bed-to-bus routine with a built-in reward
6. Stay calm under all circumstances: limit attention to any off-task behavior
7. Minimize “rewards” for staying home – no video games, sleeping, after school activities, friends over
8. In fact, staying home should be not fun = homework & chores
9. Rewards for keeping to contract; loss of privileges for breaking contract
10. Do not help child escape reasonable consequences for repeated absences

Morning Chart for Younger Child

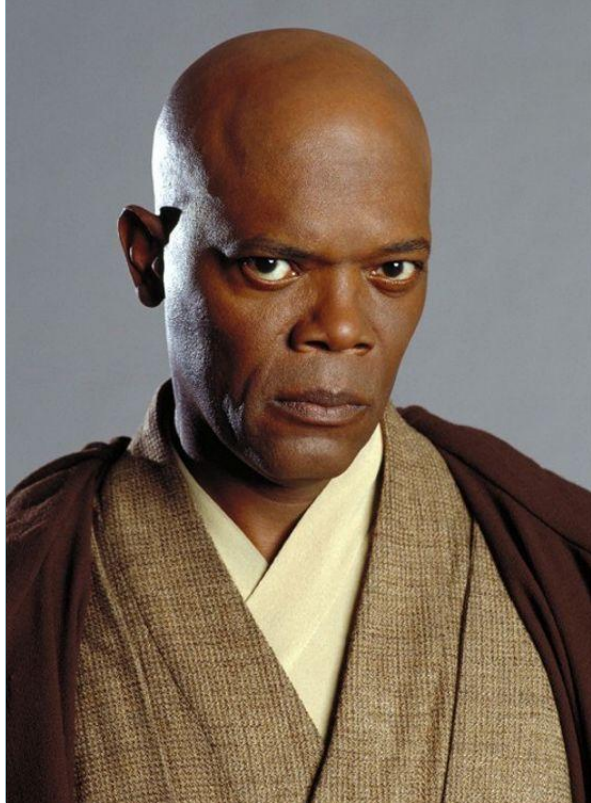
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
GET UP BATHROOM 					
BRUSH TEETH 					
GET DRESSED 					
HAIR! 					
EAT BREAKFAST 					
DONE BY 8:10!!! 					
	REWARD = SCREEN TIME FOR 10 MINUTES!				
BUS ON TIME 					

Morning Chart for Tween/Teen



	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
1. GO TO BATHROOM					
2. GO DOWNSTAIRS					
3. EAT BREAKFAST					
4. GO UPSTAIRS & GET DRESSED					
5. DO HAIR AND MAKE-UP					
6. BRUSH TEETH					
7. PUT ON COAT AND GRAB BOOKBAG					
8. GET IN CAR BY 7:50					

The Guidelines



#2 Do not provide excessive reassurance

- Reassurance-seekers, as opposed to information seekers...
 - Ask the same question over and over
 - Are not satisfied with the answer
 - Are seeking a specific answer
 - Are using your reassurance as a maladaptive way of escape from temporary distress

Avoid...

Answering the same question over and over.

Instead....

- a. Answer the question once.
- b. After that, you can say, compassionately, *“That sounds like Worry asking; I won’t answer Worry.”* OR *“Already asked; already answered.”*

The Guidelines



#3 Teach the skill of **EXTERNALIZATION**

- In other words, teach children to *shoot the messenger*
 - Worry is ALWAYS exaggerating or outright lying
 - Worry is therefore best understood as a telemarketer. Or a pop-up ad. Or a bully.
 - Worry, therefore, is best ignored or bossed back.

Avoid...

Giving the impression that you think worry has “something important” to tell the child

Instead....

- a. Model externalization.
- b. Remind the child to hang up the phone, press the delete button, or boss back.

The Guidelines



#4 Teach the skill of **COMPARTMENTALIZATION**

- Worry is always a waste of time
- So, how much time do you want the child to waste on worry a day? An hour? Or 5 minutes?

Avoid...

Allowing your child unlimited time to talk about worries.
Especially in the morning. Especially at bedtime.

Instead....

- a. Pick a guaranteed 5-minute time the child can voice worries (i.e. before dinner; during recess)
- b. Otherwise, *“save it for worry time!”*
- c. Tell the child to get busy doing something else in the meantime.
- d. Pssst.... bedtime ritual should be *“Thankfuls”* or *“3 Good Things”*



The Guidelines

What's The Plan?

#5 Teach the skill of **HAVING A PLAN**

Avoid...

Not telling the child of anxiety-provoking events in advance. You are denying the child the opportunity to practice coping skills (like tolerating distress, coming up with a plan for success, etc)

Instead....

- a) If possible, help the child **develop a plan for success** ahead of time (*focus on what TO DO, rather than what NOT to do*)
- b) It doesn't matter how scared the child was, reward her for following the plan.
- c) Plan can be as simple as 1-2 items!

Actual Coping Card for Injection Fears

1. It will hurt for a second,
but then it will be over.
2. Millions of people have gotten
shots before me, this is no
different, I can do it.



The Guidelines



#6 Never be afraid to REWARD brave behaviors

- Rewards are not bribes
- Rewards are there to motivate healthy behavior and the acquisition of skills
- They don't have to be big, *they just have to be motivating*
- Removal of privileges until a brave behavior is performed? Yeah, that's good caregiving.

Avoid...

Expecting the child to do something scary for “free” or just because you think he should.

Instead....

Have the reward established in advance, part of the plan, and preferably ready to be awarded as soon as the brave behavior is performed

The Guidelines



#7 LABEL and PRAISE coping behaviors

- Anxious children “pull for” lots of caregiver attention when they are scared
- ANY adult attention towards a behavior – *positive or negative* – reinforces that behavior
- Strive for the magic 4:1 ratio

Avoid...

Paying a lot of attention to anxiety or failures.

- (*“I know you’ll be able to do it next time.”* Said once.)

Instead....

Reinforce all brave behaviors with labeled praise.

- *“You’re a rock star because....”*
- *“Great job doing X!”*
- *“King Confidence! High Five!”*





The Guidelines



**KEEP
CALM
AND
BYE
BYE**

- #8** *(for the clingers)* **Goodbyes are short & sweet; you must model calm behavior. Leave. Give your child the opportunity to find out that her distress is temporary.**
- #9** *(for the socially anxious)* **Your child is not allowed to refuse to engage in after-school activities and social outings.**



The Guidelines



#10 Be the grown up.

- When your child is anxious, model calm behavior and optimism as much as possible.
- It's too hard to parent with an anxiety disorder of your own; get treatment.
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has the most scientific support for efficacy for anxiety disorders – find that specialist.

Avoid...

Blaming yourself for past parenting mistakes.

Instead....

“From now on, I will commit to be part of the solution.”

Active Coping: What Children will Learn



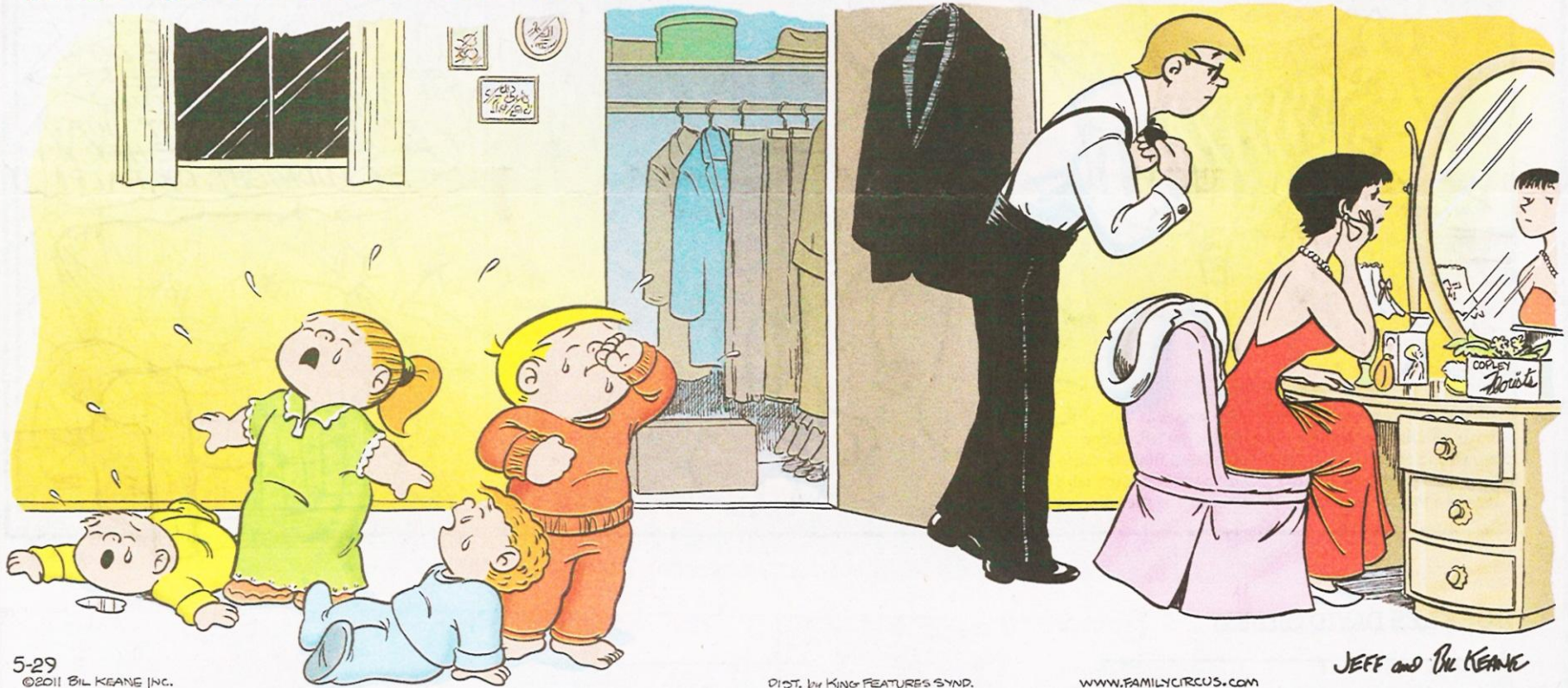
- Anxiety in *anticipation* of stressor may be higher than anxiety during *actual* stressor
- Anxiety is transient, *just like all other emotions*
- Feared consequences are highly unlikely to materialize
- Avoidance strengthens fear; facing fear weakens it
- They are CAPABLE.



QUESTIONS?

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JEFF and **BIL KEANE**

www.katherinedahlsgaard.com



@kdahlsgaard