

Bad Behavior or Bad Anxiety?

BY: JACKIE TURNER, LMFT
OCTOBER 13, 2018

What you will learn today:

- What anxiety is and how it affects learning and behavior
- How to recognize anxiety and anxious acting-out in children
- More-effective strategies for responding to such behavior
- Interventions to use when a child is visibly (classically) anxious or having a panic attack
- Answers to any questions you have! About children and anxiety, of course ☺

What is anxiety?

- A set of physiological and psychological responses with a constellation of biopsychosocial contributors.
- A feeling of fear, nervousness, worry that does not match a situation
- Associated with increasing bodily response: upset stomach, heart racing, shortness of breath, crying, escaping/wanting to escape, catastrophic thoughts
- Anxiety and fear are typical parts of the human experience—and of child development in particular

Environmental Triggers to Anxiety

- Unpredictability
- Noise Level
- Situations that remind of previous anxiety or trauma

Internal Physical Triggers for Anxiety

- Food Additives
- Medications
- Food Sensitivities
- Hunger
- Dehydration
- Nutrient Deficiency

Your Brain on Anxiety

- Activation of Fight-Flight-Freeze response
- Sympathetic nervous system, cortisol
- Blocks access to pre-frontal cortex (learning, decision-making)
- Children's PFC is not fully developed, anyway

And So You May See..

- Impulsivity
- Running away
- Becoming nonverbal
- Difficulty concentrating
- Not following directions
- Difficulty learning
- "ACTING OUT"

Your Job Is

- Not to diagnose
- To notice
- To control what you can control (this is the only time control works!)

Tool #1 Establish the Environment

- Create consistency and routine
- Cue and assist with transitions
- Consider incorporating a mindfulness component into the day
- Control what you can and forget the rest

Tool #2 Normalize Anxiety/Fear

DO

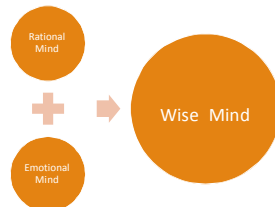
- Clarify their emotion "Are you feeling worried or scared?"
- Normalize it "It's totally OK to have those feelings"
- Problem-solve "Do you want to know what I do when I feel that way?"
 - Self-talk "I tell myself, I am brave"
 - Distraction "I remember back to a really fun time I had"
 - Visualization "I picture myself doing the thing"

DON'T

- Minimize "There's nothing to worry about."
- Invalidate "You're too old to act this way."
- Foster reliance on you "You're OK, because I'm here to help you."
- Forget to problem-solve. Validating the emotion but not moving toward resolving it, is leaving the job half-done.

Tool #3 Modeling

- Remain calm
- Access your Wise Mind
- Approach what you fear
- Avoidance is the worst treatment for anxiety! Require problem-solving and accountability.



Tool #4 Responding to a Panic Attack

- Acute anxiety experience characterized by difficulty breathing, crying, shaking, nausea, intense fear
- Establish communication "put your hand up for yes, out for no"
- Remove child or other children ("watchers")
- Ask if they can hear you, that you're going to give them some ideas
- Speak calmly and slowly about anything distracting. Be patient. Let go of your own expectations.
- GROUNDING: Identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell
- SLOW GAME: We are going to think and talk, as slowly as we can, about our favorite pizza. Mine is pepperoni... (said in exaggerated slow pace, lightly but not as a joke)

Tool #4 Cont.

- It typically takes about 15 minutes for a panic attack to end, regardless of what you do. But it often feels much longer!
- After the child is calm, get them up and moving slowly. Offer water, snack (if available).
- Discuss with child and parents if this has ever happened before, make a plan on if further interventions are needed.
