

Give Childhood Anxiety the Boot

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Three hundred kids joined our local water safety program where children ages 9-15 learn skills, such as how to swim out of a rip tide current and how to save the life of another. My daughter Angela signed up for the course when she was 9. As we walked together toward the beach for her first lesson, I wondered if she'd falter. *Will she suddenly turn to me with fear-filled eyes and beg to come home?*

For many children, anxiety is an unpredictable foe. They are hindered by self-doubt and an unrealistic fear of what might go wrong. As parents, one of our many jobs is to teach them ways to alleviate unsettling anxieties.

As a 3-year-old, Angela often clung desperately to me when I dropped her off at preschool. The same tears showed up at church and at a friend's home. As she got older, the anxious moments would wane only to resurface unexpectedly from time to time. Separation anxiety is a common emotional response in young children when they're away from their parent(s). The fear decreases as they become more independent.

Children possess natural fears toward things such as animals, large objects, high places and unfamiliar people. As children grow, they may have tough moments adjusting to new challenges. Older children may even channel their anxiety into a particular habit such as nail biting, blinking, coughing or scratching.

My concern was that Angela's anxieties might discourage her from taking healthy risks later in life. I didn't want her to grow up fearful or paranoid. So I set out to find ways to help Angela and our other two children conquer their anxieties. Here's what has proven helpful:

Compassion

Explore the fear with them. Ask them what they are afraid of and what they think could happen. Dispel fear with the facts so they can gain a new perspective. Reassure the child with: "We're in this together," and mean it. Kids need to know that no matter what they are facing, our love for them is a constant.

Scripture

When she was a preschooler, Angela and I recited 2 Timothy 1:7 together, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (NKJV). Now that she's a pre-adolescent, she and I continue to recite that favorite passage when necessary.

Prayer

Kids need to know they can and should pray to God. Help them understand that their relationship with God is special. They can pray anytime they want to or need to – before a test, when they're afraid or when they need God's reassurance.

Knowledge

Some children need to know all the details before entering unfamiliar situations. For other children, too much information can bring on anxiety. The key is to know your child well. This may mean that you prepare each child for school (or other events) in a different way based on his emotional need.

No sugar coating

When kids show fear, be up front with them. Dr. Kevin Leman encourages parents to acknowledge those feelings. Before heading for a doctor's visit, for example, he suggests saying, "I understand you're a little afraid of going to the doctor. You may have to get a shot, and a shot will hurt. But then you'll feel better."

Responsibility

Recently, when my husband, Dan, and I took our 5-year-old, Emma, to lunch, she dropped her fork. So we encouraged her to go to the counter and ask for another one. She waited in line, often glancing our way. She returned to the table with a big grin and a sense of accomplishment.

Two weeks into the water safety program, Angela saw the ocean's crashing waves and froze. Her stomach ached. She felt sick. When I tried to leave, she cried. I allowed her to come home – on the condition she go to bed and rest. "We'll start over tomorrow," I told her. The next day she dove back into the program and successfully completed it.

Ten years old now, Angela is learning to face her fears. When her anxiety shows up unannounced, I remind myself of how far she has come.