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“The Anxiety Trap”

Topic: Anxiety in children

Can you tell us about yourself?

I’m a clinical psychologist and I work with children and youth between the ages of 10 and 19 who struggle with various mental health issues. I work both for the public service and have a private practice.

In my work for the public service, I primarily focus on helping youth who have gotten into trouble with the law. These young people come from a variety of backgrounds and are diverse in terms of their ethnicity, culture, gender, family constellation, socio-economic and educational level etc. Often, anxiety can be a contributing factor to their current situation. Many of these young people make poor decisions (i.e. associate with negative peers, abuse drugs and alcohol, skip school) in order to manage their anxious feelings.

In my private practice I work a lot with teenagers and young adults who experience significant anxiety. Many are in high school or university and some are in private schools where the expectations on them are particularly high. These young people struggle with being in a competitive academic arena and with their parents’ expectations. Their levels of anxiety can reach debilitating proportions, often leading to school avoidance and other problematic behaviours.

Anxiety is something that is not limited to certain children or families. It affects many of us and seems to be increasing in young people. Anxiety knows no boundaries and can become a problem for young people regardless of their ethnic background, upbringing or socio-economic level.

Why are some children anxious?

It is important to remember that some level of anxiety is completely normal and adaptive. Everyone experiences anxiety – anxiety is protective and we need anxiety in order to alert us to danger and keep us safe - it is our body’s alarm system. Unfortunately for some people, their alarm system is going off when there is no danger and this is when it becomes a problem.

Most of us, children and adults, are on a continuum in terms of our levels of anxiety. Some people are not anxious enough which can open the doors to things like accidents and risky behaviour while others are so anxious that they are virtually paralyzed. There is a healthy level of anxiety that we all need to give us the motivation to do things. Anxiety at this level is a positive, motivational force. It’s when anxiety reaches extreme proportions, that it becomes problematic.

Anxiety can be the result of multiple factors – some children may be born with a more anxious temperament or be wired to experience more anxiety – others have experienced trauma or some other stressor in their childhood or in their environment that could lead them to feel more anxious – sometimes it's a combination of a few or all of these factors.

How common is anxiety in children and adolescents?

Anxiety is a very broad term that encompasses a lot of different things. Research indicates that approximately 25 % of young people between the ages of 13 and 18 have mild to moderate anxiety. Regardless of the number, what seems to be the case and what I have witnessed in my own work is that problems with anxiety appear to be on the rise in children and adolescents.

What is contributing to this rise in anxiety? Can you talk about some social and environmental factors that might contribute to anxiety in young children and in adolescents?

We are living in an anxious world. We are continuously connected to social media and the internet and are constantly being bombarded with scary images of terrorism and disaster, news of the latest school shootings and murders. There is little down time away from this information overload. Parents are working hard to support their families which often leads to less time spent with their children. Children are spending more time on their devices (i.e. computers, cell phones, tablets) leading to less connection with others face to face and in real life. Parents are stressed and in turn, kids are stressed.

I think as parents, it is important for us to remember that we are our children's first teachers. From birth, children get messages from their parents about how to interact with the world. They watch our reactions, they watch everything that we do. Although this can seem daunting, it is also a wonderful opportunity for parents to model behaviours for their children.

If a parent is anxious, this can definitely play a role in a child developing an anxious outlook on life. In young children, things like overscheduling and lack of sleep can also contribute to anxiety.

There is a lot of societal pressure on parents these days to have their children in multiple activities – sports, music, dance and even academic-type after-school activities like coding, robotics etc. This overscheduling can result in children having less time to engage in free play, use their imaginations and just be kids. The value in these types of unstructured activities is immeasurable. However, it seems that many families have forgotten about this value in free play in their need to compete with other parents and have their kids be the “best” or in their intention to want to provide their child with every possible opportunity.

What about sports for kids – do they contribute or combat anxiety?

There is a lot of value in children participating in sports and other activities. Children can learn so much from being on a team – such as cooperation and kindness, learning to win sometimes and lose sometimes – these things build resilience in children and resilience helps combat anxiety.

But for some kids, team sports are not their strength and being forced into team sports can lead to anxiety. In this case, it's important for parents to listen to their children and help them discover their strengths and interests.

In my family – we have a rule – I ask my children to pick one activity each term – be it gymnastics or swimming or dance. Once they start, even if they don't like it, they are told that they need to complete the term as they have made a commitment to the class, the team etc. and after the term is up, they don't have to sign up again. In this way, I think that I am giving them the opportunity to try different things, choose what they enjoy best but still understand the value of committing and following through with something.

The process of participating in an activity (such as music or sports) and learning through practice to improve your abilities builds self-confidence in children. They might not be great at something right away, but learning that through hard work, they can get better is key to helping children become confident and less anxious.

It is important that parents encourage their kids to do their best and enjoy the process. It is also important for parents to model good sportsmanship and consider the messages that they are giving to their children about what their expectations are. For example, if the parent yells at the coach at the end of a losing game, what kind of message is he or she sending his or her child? Or if a parent picks on all of the things a child did not play correctly during a music recital, again, what message is being sent?

Our job is to shore up our children – we want to be encouraging but at the same time, not take things too seriously.

This makes me think of the tendency for many anxious people to be perfectionists? Can you speak about that?

In my practice, I am seeing more and more adolescents struggling with perfectionism and constant worry. These young people worry about everything – from things like grades and friendships all the way down to ordering the wrong thing in a restaurant or not wearing the right outfit.

The perfectionism particularly in the school setting can become debilitating to them. These teenagers become so overwhelmed with anxiety, about not getting perfect grades, that they can't even begin to study for an exam. This sets them up in a vicious cycle – they worry they will fail, they can't study, they end up not doing well, this increases their anxiety for the next exam and so on and so forth.

What do you think contributes to this need to be perfect?

There are lots of things that contribute to this perfectionism including parental pressure to do well, personality factors etc. but I believe that increase in social media use has really had an influence on this in adolescents. Teenagers are constantly comparing themselves to other people and this diminishes their self-esteem. They are always worried about what others think of them and spend a lot of time looking to see how many of their “friends” have “liked” their photos or given them a thumbs up or a thumbs down on some comment they have made. Young people are constantly being judged on the things that they post online.

Then they also spend a lot of time looking at other people’s posts. It always seems that their friends are having more fun, going to more parties and in general, having a happier life than they are. This can lead to a constant feeling of not being good enough or of missing out on something. What many young people don’t think about is that the pictures people post are their “highlight reel” – they don’t post the negative interactions, the sad times, the bad experiences etc.

In this way, many young people feel alone in their struggles as it seems that everyone else is fine and they are not. This can have an impact on their self-confidence and as we know, confidence and healthy self-esteem are important elements for a successful future.

What can parents do to help children with worrying and perfectionism??

As parents we have to help our children build confidence and self-esteem. The best way to do this is not to do everything for them. Let children make mistakes. We have to help our children by letting them learn to do things on their own. As I mentioned earlier, making mistakes and getting through it, builds resiliency.

I know as a parent of young children, this can be hard to do. Sometimes it’s easier to do things for our kids instead of letting them do it themselves. Often, allowing them to struggle, means letting go of our own time schedules, ideas about how something “should” be done, and being tolerant of mess, disorder etc.

An example comes to mind from my own life where my daughter (who just completed grade two) had a school project to complete. It took a lot of will power for us not to step in and help her with it. Of course, we were there to support her, but she needed to do the project on her own...and maybe it didn’t look as beautiful as we would like, or the lines were not straight or there were spelling mistakes...but that’s okay. She learned more from that project doing it herself, than having us fix all of the little things for her. This was an exercise in self-control and patience for us. There is no doubt that taking a step back from doing things for your children can be difficult.

This brings me to the concept of control. As parents, we need to remember that we cannot control everything for our children. Not being able to tolerate uncertainty leads

to anxiety. We can teach our children that if there's one thing we can count on, it is that things are constantly changing. Being flexible and understanding that there are things we cannot predict is the challenge for many parents. Showing our children that they can do something imperfectly and that it is okay, is important modeling.

What about bullying in schools? This can be a cause of anxiety in children.

Yes – conversations around bullying can probably be a whole other episode. But in short, I believe that if your child is being bullied, it is important for the parent to take the child seriously, work with the schools to find out what's happening, and keep open communication with your child.

For parents this can be a very emotional issue so it's important to check your own reactions to the situation and make sure you are trying to model calm and appropriate behaviour for your child. Your child will be looking to you for guidance, reassurance and support. Listen to your child and work together to figure out ways of handling the situation. Help your child understand that they will not be able to change the bully's behaviour, but can come up with strategies for handling things. Help them to see that the bullying is not really about them but rather, about the bully (perhaps there's something going on in that child's life that's leading them to act out) – basically, helping your child have empathy and take a different perspective rather than internalizing the messages.

Finally, right from the beginning, I strongly encourage parents to help their children develop multiple sources of friendship – through school, family friends, sporting activities, neighbours, etc. so that if your child is struggling with friendships in one arena, they are not completely isolated and have social supports and outlets elsewhere. I can guarantee that this can serve all children well even if they aren't being bullied.

Many people these days are living far away from extended family and social supports who can help with the challenges that arise from raising children. Building a community for your children (be it a religious or ethnic/cultural community or a community of neighbours or friends) can help them to have trusted people to turn to when they are struggling in some area of their life. Sometimes, it can be easier for children to turn to another trusted adult than to their parents. Creating opportunities for those relationships can help children to grow up feeling safe, loved and connected to others. The old adage that "it takes a village to raise a child" really holds true. Creating your own "village" can be of great benefit when you don't have extended family close by.

What about the incredibly shy child? What can parents do to help them?

With shy children, the key is to help them to become more comfortable with others and in social settings. I encourage parents to help children build relationships slowly with others and create opportunities for them through one-on-one playdates and taking them to small, less crowded venues for activities. Parents may even need to help facilitate play between their child and another child at first, to help their child become comfortable. The most important thing to remember is that all children need social connections (even if they are shy and afraid) and the quality of friendships will likely be

more important than the number of friends. One or two good friends can have more value than twenty acquaintances. It is also important to recognize and respect that very introverted children need downtime to reset and reenergize themselves. Providing opportunities for them to recharge (likely on their own) will be important in achieving a good balance between connection and comfort level.

How can parents help build resiliency from the beginning of life?

We have talked about the importance of building resiliency in children but there are some things that parents can do right from when their children are born including:

- Being a fairly consistent, responsive caregiver
- Letting your child make mistakes – not doing everything for them
- Enabling lots of free play and laughter
- Recognizing that small stresses, such as vaccinations, other medical treatments, time away from a parent etc. all help the child build resiliency.

Final message - What can parents do to help their kids with anxiety management?

- Teach them that anxiety is a normal part of life and there are tools that everyone can use to manage it if it gets out of control
- Role model a healthy lifestyle and good coping skills when things are hard
- Don't try to be perfect
- Make sure they get enough sleep
- Reduce overscheduling
- Encourage free play and unstructured activity
- Teach them about their emotions and their thoughts
- Teach them to focus on the present instead of worrying about the future
- Help them to learn how to tolerate uncertainty
- Teach them to breathe deeply
- Encourage physical exercise
- Play with their children
- Make time to enjoy things and have fun with friends

If you think your child is suffering from a significant anxiety problem and is not able to manage it at home be sure to seek help. Research supports the importance of early intervention for the best outcomes in the treatment of mental health disorders. There are lots of wonderful online materials and deep breathing and relaxation apps that can help guide you and of course, therapists that specialize in working with parents and with young people to manage anxiety, particularly through cognitive behavioural techniques. Keltymentalhealth.ca and anxietybc.com are two trusted resources with valuable information and tools on the management of anxiety and other mental health concerns.

The most important thing to remember is that everyone will have moments of high anxiety at some point in their lives - the key is not to let it trap you and to recognize that there are things you can do to help manage it if the anxiety gets out of control.