

Children's Anxiety in Uncertain Times

Presentation by Betsy Mann for Maple Ridge Elementary School, May 5, 2021

What is making children anxious?

- their brain
- their body

By acting on one, we can influence the other.

By acting on ourselves, we can influence our children.

What their brains want and aren't getting:

- A sense of control
- Familiarity and predictability
- Relief from boredom
- Connectedness to people who provide support and safety

What their bodies need and may not be getting enough of:

- Sleep
- Exercise
- Nutrition
- Restorative play
- Relaxation

The brain's alarm system alerts us to threat and keeps us safe by moving us to act for:

- **preparedness**
- **prudence**

The alarm system is very useful when the threat is quickly over and dealt with.

The alarm is counterproductive when the threat lasts a long time and when there is little we can do to change the situation.

In more normal times, the alarm system goes off, we deal with the threat, then our nervous system returns to calm on its own.

These are not normal times. It's okay to not be okay. However, we cannot count on "just getting by" and having the alarm we feel end on its own.

We have to intentionally act to help our children bring their nervous system back to calm so they can recover their equilibrium. That goes for us too.

Some things you can do on your own, but don't hesitate to reach out for support from others.

Think of it like having a training program for running a marathon. An intentional training program will help you and your family get to the end of the marathon in good health, both physical and mental. It may be useful to also have a trainer to support you.

Some possible signs of anxiety

- Seeks reassurance
- Reluctant to separate from parents
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomach aches)
- Moody and irritable
- Tantrums and meltdowns
- Trouble sleeping

What you can do to answer the needs of the brain:

- **Increase the sense of control**
 - Frame protective actions as positive steps rather than negative limits. They are helping keep everyone safe.
 - Give children opportunities to contribute to the well-being of the family and the community. More chores may help they feel they can make a difference.
 - Stay informed about the virus without getting overwhelmed. If speculation about the future increases preparedness and prudence, it is useful. Otherwise, it may just fuel anxiety. Manage exposure to news and social media. Identify trusted sources. Talk about *good* news.
 - “When I was a boy and would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers’ Neighbourhood TV program)
 - Answer your children’s questions without overwhelming them with too much information. Help children make sense of *their* experience. You don’t have to make sense of the whole world.
 - Look for the positives and encourage gratitude. Some families make it a daily practice in their routine to say one thing that went well during the day or one thing they are grateful for.
 - Allow children to make appropriate choices in everyday life. Give them control where you can. Leave lots of time for free play when children make up their own games. Free play helps children process their fears of danger, of the unknown and of separation.
 - Video games may be exciting, stimulating and even educational, but they do not restore calm to children’s nervous system.

Increase predictability

When the patterns of the day and the week are familiar and predictable, the brain can run a lot of a day's activities on automatic. It has more resources available to learn new things and to regulate emotions and control impulsive behaviour.

- Familiar patterns have been disrupted so establishing a new schedule for the day will make life predictable again. Writing it down will be helpful.
- Routines give children a sense of the familiar. They know what is coming next, so it feels like life is under control. Young children benefit from concrete visual cues. A schedule chart done with pictures of the activities that will make up their day can be useful.
- We all feel less stressed when life is more predictable.
- When things happen in the same order every day, it gives children a **sense of security**. There is structure to their day. Someone is in charge of things and they don't have to worry.

What to include in the routine?

- Protect **sleep**, your children's and your own.
 - Keep to a regular schedule for getting up and going to bed.
 - Turn off all screens at least an hour before bedtime.
 - Recognize bedtime as separation and reinforce your connection with rituals.
- **Movement**
 - Take regular movement breaks from screen time.
 - Yoga
 - Dancing
 - Mini-trampoline
 - Go outside for a walk, even if it's only around the block.
 - Encourage safe outdoor sports practice.
- **Nutrition**
 - Serve meals and snacks at regular times.
 - Share family meals.
- **Relaxation - body**
 - Progressive relaxation (tense and release); Spaghetti toes for children (Mindmasters 2 program, ages 4 - 10) You can't be both relaxed and anxious at the same time.
 - Breathing
 - Music

- Snow globe as point of focus and timer for relaxation
- **Relaxation – mind**
 - Worry Box – to stop rumination. *The Worry Box* by Suzanne Chiew, ages 4 - 8
 - Umbalikiki story from Mindmasters 2 program, ages 4 – 10
 - Dedicated “worry time” scheduled in the routine for a defined short period, timed on a timer, for older children, teens and adults
 - Staying in the present moment.
 - Mindfulness – *Sitting Like a Frog* for ages 5 – 12, Breathr app from Anxiety BC for teens

Relieve boredom and distract from routine

While routine and predictability allow the brain to devote energy to other things, the brain also likes novelty. Novelty can effectively distract from worries.

- **Distract with nostalgia**
 - We can’t plan future vacations, but we can look back at shared family fun in the past. Bring out old videos or photos of past family fun. Reliving those good moments releases pleasure chemicals in the brain.
- **Distract with novelty**
 - Learn something new, start a new project, read new books.
 - Spread a blanket on the living room floor and have an indoor picnic.

Maintain connection to people who provide support and safety

Because we are limited to our household for real contact, parents are called on to supply much of the social connectedness children used to get from other adults in their lives and from other children.

Look for ways to **have fun and laugh together**. A few examples:

- Roughhousing
- Watching a funny movie or sports on tv together
- Playing card games
- Doing puzzles together
- Outdoor activities like biking or hiking. In nature, is better.
- Making something together, for instance cooking, doing crafts, building models, etc.
- Singing together, especially silly songs to get you laughing; having a pretend campfire singalong or sing karaoke.

- Learn something together, like yoga, geocaching, a new board game. To avoid sibling conflicts, cooperative games are preferable. They build a habit of cooperation rather than competition. One local source is Family Pastimes in Perth who have been in business almost 50 years with games for children from age 3 up to adults.
- Stay connected with friends and neighbours with physically distanced conversations outdoors.
- Stay connected with family by using virtual platforms or by writing letters on paper that you send in the mail.

Provide support and safety.

When children feel **seen, heard and understood**, they feel connected and safe. They feel less anxious and they have less need to misbehave to get their parents' attention. We often say, "They're just looking for attention." But maybe they are just looking for connection and they have found that the fastest way to get connected is to misbehave. The connection comes through negative attention, but for children, that's better than no attention at all.

- Listen and validate emotions. You don't have to agree with your children, just acknowledge how they feel.
- Name it to tame it. Giving emotions a name helps children recover their calm.
- You don't have to fix it. Just let them know they are heard. Problem solving can come later; they may be the ones to find the solutions.
- **Develop your own comfort with uncertainty.**
 - Your children are watching you. Your moods are catching. It is like being an effective master to a dog. The dog sees its master as the leader of the pack. If the leader is scared, it scares the pack. Keep your own emotions under control when you talk to your children. Show your concern, but project calm and confidence.
 - "The treatment for anxiety isn't to make the fear go away, it's to manage the fear and tolerate uncertainty. What will your children have learned from you in the way you handled this? Will they look back and say 'Wow, I'm really impressed with how Mom and Dad held it together?' Or are they going to walk away and think the world is a scary place?" Clinical Psychologist Jerry Bubrick, PhD.
- **What are you doing to give *your* brain:**
 - A sense of control?
 - Familiarity and predictability?
 - Relief from boredom?
 - Connectedness to people who provide support and safety?
- **What are you doing to give *your* body enough:**
 - Sleep?
 - Exercise?
 - Nutrition?

- Restorative Play?
- Relaxation?

You can be committed to your child's well-being, you can have lots of knowledge about how the brain and body react to stress, you can have learned many, many strategies for countering the effects of prolonged stress, but if you don't have the energy, you can't put those things into practice and the support for your parenting will be shaky. It's like they say in the plane: If the cabin loses pressure (and it has!), and you are travelling with someone who needs your assistance (and you are), put your own oxygen mask on first before assisting the other person. And to continue the analogy, if you are having trouble getting your own oxygen mask working for you, reach out for help, for your children or for yourself.

This material is excerpted from the PowerPoint slideshow that accompanied the presentation by Betsy Mann, Certified Canadian Family Educator, sponsored by the Parent Council of Maple Ridge Public School and supported by Family Services Ottawa. It is being distributed to parents who registered as a reminder of the more complete elaboration of the subject during the actual presentation. It is not intended to completely cover everything that was presented at that time.