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On Raising Brave Children

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We all want our children to learn to approach academic and other challenges with confidence, to cope with their emotions in healthy ways, and to engage happily in everyday activities. We want them to be excited to join their peers at the birthday party, to sing proudly at their school concert, and to approach new situations as opportunities for fun and adventure. Though we want our children to be knowledgeable about safety precautions, we don't want them to overestimate the possibility of danger in everyday situations. We want to teach them how to cope with stress in healthy ways. We want them to try new things and we want to be there to praise their successes and provide encouragement if they fail. Luckily, we can take an active role in teaching our children how to be “brave.”

As Director of the Child and Adolescent Fear and Anxiety Treatment Program at the Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders at Boston University, I've met hundreds of children and adolescents who are coping with stress, fear or worries that interfere in various ways in their everyday lives. An 8-year-old has difficulty separating from mom to go on a playdate or to a birthday party. One child is terrified by lightning and thunder. One child has panic attacks in school. Another can't fall asleep at night. Another finds social encounters painful. Each may cope with these fears in ways that are not healthy—by adopting avoidance behaviors, for example.

Although their particular fears and worries differ, almost all of these children ultimately express the same goal: to live a happier life filled with less worry, stress and fear, and filled with more fun and adventure. Their parents also have similar hopes and dreams for their children: they want their children to engage in everyday events with greater confidence, joy and excitement, to be resilient in the face of stress, and to enjoy more “carefree” childhoods.

The hopeful message I have is that we can play a critical role in helping make these goals a reality. In fact, it's in the interaction between a parent and child that kids first and most powerfully learn important life lessons—that it's safe to try new things, that frustration and fear can be overcome, that the situations that make us afraid can be mastered.

Growing Up Brave: What Does it Mean?

What does it mean to raise a child who is brave? Although one might assume that bravery simply means not being afraid, we know there are some things in the world that should cause us fear. So, as parents, we are faced with a challenging task: to strike the right balance between teaching children to be aware of the types of situations that are truly not safe or appropriate, and teaching them ways to approach the majority of life's experiences with confidence. In teaching children to be brave, we are in fact teaching them how to cope with the range of emotions that we experience in life, such as sadness, happiness, anger and fear, and to recognize that these are all very natural. Of course, our children will have to face some challenging situations in life. Whether it is coping with difficult peer interactions, dealing with academic difficulties, or facing the specific fears that are inhibiting them, children and adolescents are continually faced with everyday stressors. And it is natural that these stressors will ignite a range of emotions.

A wealth of research has shown that children's ability to cope effectively with these everyday stressors is a critical skill for healthy functioning, and predicts many long-term positive outcomes

in their lives. Brave children learn to navigate life's difficult situations, and learn to cope with their emotions, even if these emotions are temporarily difficult to deal with. Brave children develop the personal resources to deal with stress, with daily hassles, and with what is frightening. Brave children learn to be accepting of themselves, and to feel good about their accomplishments. Thus, being "brave" doesn't mean that a child never experiences fear. I think of teaching bravery as helping our children develop skills to cope with a range of emotions, even the uncomfortable ones, and showing them that they are capable of facing their fears and approaching new challenges.

Are Childhood Stress and Anxiety On the Rise?

Throughout history we have always faced stressors—from polio, to wars, to current-day terrorism. Although stressors have always been present, our awareness and understanding of stress, anxiety and its effects on children have improved, as have our diagnostic practices. Though anxiety disorders are one of the most prevalent types of psychological problems facing youth today (affecting approximately one in five children), it is unclear whether rising rates of child anxiety disorders reflect our better identification of these disorders or an actual shift in their occurrence. Given that we currently have more routes through which the news can reach children—through television, the internet, mobile devices—children today may be receiving a more constant stream of information telling them "the world is dangerous," thus focusing their attention on their lack of control over their environments.

Everyday Stress vs. Significant Anxiety

A key sign that an anxiety is significant is that it is beginning to interfere either in the child's life or the family's life. If your child is no longer doing things that are developmentally appropriate,

such as going to birthday parties, school, dances or movies—or is participating in everyday activities with a lot of distress—these are important signs that your child's anxiety may be reaching clinical levels and may warrant further assessment and, perhaps, treatment by a psychologist or other mental health professional. Other signs of significant anxiety can include excessive reassurance seeking; physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches or difficulty sleeping; excessive clinginess; frequent tantrums; negative thoughts; difficulty paying attention; excessive avoidance; and depressed mood.

How Can We Foster Bravery?

- *Learn to identify normal, age-appropriate fears.*

Many fears in life are actually normal and adaptive, and naturally protect us from danger. Even cross-culturally, children experience similar fears at predictable stages in development. For example, it is normal for infants and toddlers to fear loud noises, large objects, or strangers. These fears typically resolve after the first year. As a child enters the preschool years (roughly ages 3-5), fears of monsters, ghosts, insects, animals and shots and separation anxiety are quite typical. By the early school age years (ages 6-12), fears of death, inadequate school performance, and real world dangers are on the rise. Adolescence brings its own fears, including worries about the future, the world, and worries about social relationships. Most of these fears tend to rise and dissipate on their own. However, if these fears become interfering or do not go away, they may warrant closer attention.

- *Teach children that anxiety is a natural, human emotion.*

When a child says he or she is afraid, our initial instinct may be to wave it off, "There's nothing to be afraid of, don't worry, relax." But fears and anxieties are natural parts of being human. It is helpful to teach children how anxiety can actually be adaptive at times; some anxiety can enable people to perform better, to run

faster, or can keep us safe when we are in real danger. Teach your child to recognize the difference between helpful levels of anxiety and unnecessarily high levels of anxiety. By keeping our adaptive anxiety but getting rid of excessive anxiety, we can learn to enjoy everyday activities to the fullest.

- *Teach children to “break down” anxious feelings.*

One important skill to teach your child is to understand the cycle of anxiety and how to break down anxious feelings into thoughts, physical feelings, and behaviors. Children can learn coping tools that target each part of the cycle. They can learn ways to recognize and challenge their “worry” thoughts when they are inaccurate or not true. They can learn skills for becoming less frightened of anxious feelings. They can also learn to reduce avoidant behaviors and approach situations with more confidence.

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- *Model brave behavior.*

It is important to remember that you are a model for your children on how to perceive the world and how to react to situations. Be aware that children can acquire fears simply by observing the anxious or fearful behavior of those around them. Take advantage of opportunities to model use of good coping or problem solving skills when facing stressful situations. Also, remember that children can pick up on parents’ worries—thus, it is helpful to model for your children healthy ways for coping with everyday stress and fears. Let your children hear you reflect on how you problem-solved a difficult situation. Model for your child how trying new things can bring happiness and joy.

- *Strike a balance: Be encouraging but not overly reassuring, or overprotective.*

Years of research in the field of child anxiety have taught us that there are several strategies we may instinctually try that sometimes inadvertently cause our children more fear. As parents, we often understandably struggle with finding the right balance between encouraging our children to try new things and protecting them from harm or failure. When do we pave our children’s path, and when do we take a step back and let them try on their own? Though protecting children from negative emotion at all costs often feels instinctually like the right way to help, we know that overprotecting and overly reassuring children that they will be OK only breeds more anxiety, and prevents them from developing coping skills that are critical for health and happiness. Encouraging children to try new activities might also require coping with our own anxiety about their trying something new. Strike a balance between letting your children know what to do if they need help, and communicating to them that you are confident in their ability to cope with whatever comes their way as they embark on new adventures.

- *Give encouragement, offer choices, and set limits.*

It’s not necessary to rush an 18-month-old into swim lessons because he looks hesitant about going into the water. On the other hand, the child who rejects summer camp probably shouldn’t be allowed the option of sitting home and playing games on the computer all summer. Set up appropriate opportunities for your children to face their particular fears, providing extra encouragement when necessary. Give them acceptable choices and let them take part in choosing their activities. Giving children age-appropriate opportunities for control over decisions in their lives can help develop their self-confidence.

- *Limit exposure to frightening news events.*

Given the many streams of information available to children through the internet, television, mobile devices, radio, peers and other parents, it is understandably difficult to limit kids' exposure to frightening news events.

You can teach older children about the differences between the "possibility" versus the "probability" of a negative event occurring. It will help to reassure them that they are safe if they learn to not over-

estimate the likelihood of bad things happening. For very young children, unless the child brings it up, it is usually unnecessary to discuss frightening news events with them. Rather, it is healthier to help children to keep their focus "in the moment" rather than on anxiety about the future.

- *Encourage and reinforce brave behaviors.*

There are various ways for children to approach new or feared situations gradually. For example, for a child who is afraid of the water slide, maybe she can run around the sprinkler and enjoy the excitement of having water droplets on her face for the first time. Gradually she will take steps into the pool, and though it may take a few tries and some consistent praise, she eventually may enjoy her first ride down the water slide. Taking baby steps, or facing fears in a gradual, stepwise fashion—I call this a "bravery ladder"—is a key component of the anxiety-reducing strategies we use to help children and adolescents begin to adopt more brave behaviors. Some children have trouble diving right into a situation that causes them fear. You can teach your child to approach new situations bit by bit, gaining control and success with each step. You can help your child set up a plan for gradually

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trying new things. One success breeds another. Watching your child develop confidence is the best reward.

Our Important Role

There are many skills that parents, grandparents, teachers, school staff, clinicians, and nurses and other healthcare professionals can utilize to help children learn to cope effectively with stress and anxiety and to help them to "grow up brave." Research on anxiety disorders in childhood and their effective evidence-based treatments have grown tremendously in recent years. Cognitive-behavioral treatments, which are skills-focused treatments, should be the frontline treatment of choice for helping children with anxiety disorders quickly return to normal functioning. It is often in the course of confronting everyday challenges that we develop a foundation of critical coping skills. Thus, we can view life's challenges as opportunities for children to develop coping skills. By reinforcing our children's brave behaviors, we can help them to lead lives filled with more fun, happiness and adventure.

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