

# Anxiety in Children and Youth for Parents

Doug Anderson, Ph.D.  
Nova School Psychologist  
Licensed Psychologist

# Agenda

- ◆ Facts about anxiety
- ◆ How anxiety works
- ◆ **Signs and symptoms**
- ◆ **Strategies for Parents**
- ◆ **Partnering with schools**
- ◆ Tips for specific issues

# Facts About Anxiety

- ◆ Approximately 13% of children experience an anxiety disorder prior to age 18
- ◆ About 50% of those children have a second anxiety disorder or other mental health disorder such as depression
- ◆ Untreated anxiety can lead to serious issues that persist into adulthood, including depression

# Fears & Anxiety Are Usually Normal and Adaptive

At mild to moderate levels, anxiety....

- ◆ raises alertness to danger
- ◆ increases motivation to change
- ◆ inspires action

# Brain Functioning 101

Amygdala reacts to potentially dangerous stimulus (tiger, threat of emotional loss)

1. Immediate, unconscious "fight or flight" arousal response

AND

2. Sends slower message to prefrontal cortex requiring more processing with less control over "fight or flight"

# Brain Function 101 (cont.)

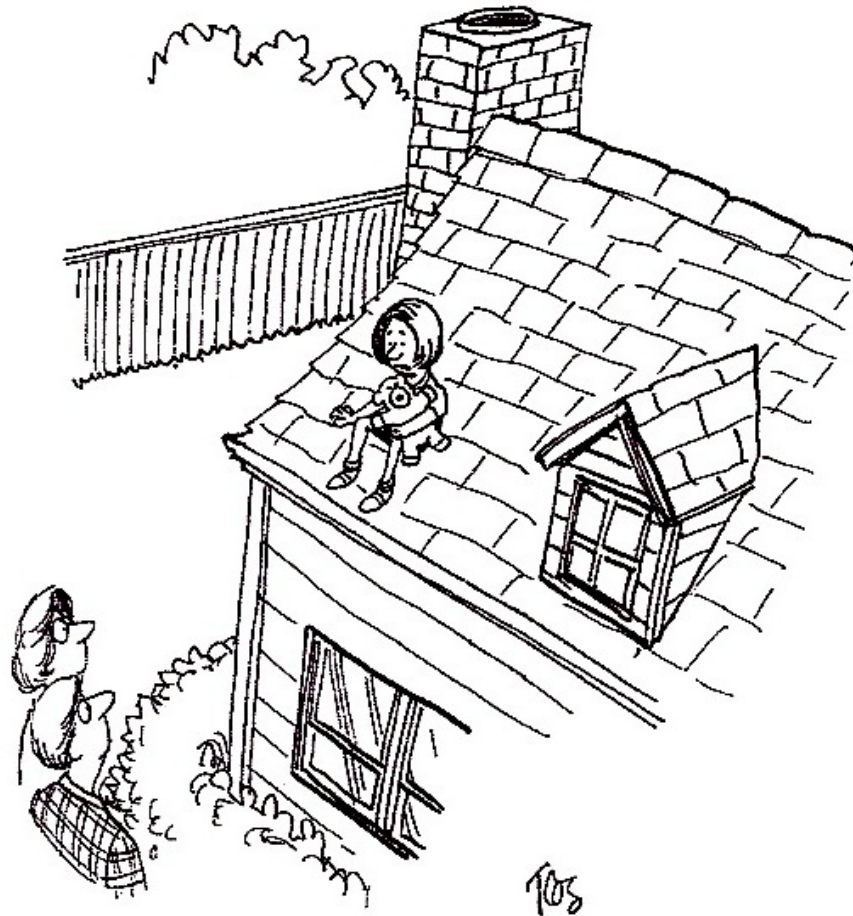
Prefrontal cortex responds in 1 of 3 ways.....

1. Sends all clear message to amygdala  
(realizes no threat)
  
2. Develops a plan to deal with the threat
  - A. *Avoid/Escape (generally preferred but NOT adaptive AND very hard to extinguish)*
  
  - B. Coping with the threat

# Brain Function 101 (cont.)

3. *If can't escape or cope...maintain heightened arousal state*
  - *keep trying to figure it out*
  - *unrealistic expectations, perfectionism, and/or lack of skills are problematic*
  - *continued arousal has negative impact*
  - *perceptual bias due to looking for negative*

by Andrew Toos



**"Right now I'm dealing with how to get down."**

# When Is Anxiety a Problem

- ◆ Anxiety and worries interfere with ability to take action and solve problems
- ◆ Interferes with daily living
- ◆ Inability to recover and adapt
- ◆ See Symptoms on MACMH handout

# Expectations for Change

- ◆ Success requires understanding, support for coping, and expectations for change
- ◆ Face fears....need to get out of comfort zone to see improvement
- ◆ Active coping

# Strategies for Parents

- ◆ Set expectations for change
- ◆ Focus on expected outcomes vs anxiety
- ◆ **Encourage exercise, personal time, enough sleep and eating healthy**
- ◆ Teach and practice organization of materials and time

# Focus on Successes

## WATCH VIDEO

- Explore previous coping successes
- ◆ Do more of what's working in other situations
- Amplify positive changes that will happen when coping improves

# Parenting Risk Factors for Anxiety

- ◆ Over-controlling or hovering can....
  - too controlling or protective for kids to develop feelings of competency from success
  - model and shape anxiety (watch facial expression and language, ie. "Are you sure")
  - allows child to avoid or escape fearful situations

# Parenting Risk Factors for Anxiety

- ◆ Over-controlling or hovering parents....
  - Extra attention justifies fears
  - Intervene more than necessary
  - Do not give students practice and confidence to handle stresses of life
  - Risk trying to solve problem when student just needs support or empathy

# When Anxiety Happens

- Empathize with feelings BRIEFLY but then...
- **Help students cope with anxiety instead of escaping anxiety**
- ◆ Listen but don't talk too much (80/20 rule-- listen 80%, talk 20% of the time)
- ◆ Self-relaxation and positive self-talk
- ◆ Engage student in activity or distract them (self-distraction is most effective)

# Teaching Coping

- Teach self-monitoring skills
- ◆ Teach self-relaxation
- ◆ Teach self-talk (I can do it!)
- ◆ Teach Yoga, meditation, etc.
- ◆ Teach accurate thinking and perspective.... "What's the worse thing that could happen?"

# Relaxation Skills

- ◆ Deep, slow breathing
- ◆ Pleasant imagery--Imagine yourself in your "special place" using 5 senses
- ◆ Progressive muscle relaxation

# Shaping Independence

Increase independence over time.....

- ◆ Increasing length of behavior (more time in stressful situation)
- ◆ Increasing difficulty of behaviors that lead to stress (short speech to longer speech)
- ◆ Increasingly stressful environments (share answer to teacher....small group....class)
- ◆ Extra practice until comfort level achieved (speeches)

# Talking Points with Teachers

- Maintain realistic, attainable goals and expectations for students
- ◆ If student can't be successful, provide modifications & accommodations
- ◆ Collaborate with child and teachers to defeat anxiety
- ◆ Develop plan to support students through change (new school, new teacher, etc.)

# Tips for Separation Anxiety / School Avoidance

- ◆ Clarify that there is not legitimate anxiety producing thing at school
- ◆ Develop detailed morning schedule with fun activity at the end
- ◆ Follow the schedule with limited talking
- ◆ Briefly empathize with concerns at bedtime or morning, but write them down for later discussion

# Tips for Separation Anxiety / School Avoidance

- ◆ Develop separation plan and follow it
- ◆ Have plan to get student involved in something right away
- ◆ Don't hang around or check back in
- ◆ Be careful with school visits that are not at the end of the day

# Tips for Homework Anxiety

- ◆ Develop consistent homework schedule
- ◆ Create homework completion space
- ◆ Show interest in homework but don't do it for them
- ◆ Try to do work, read, etc. when student is doing homework
- ◆ Help student break up larger assignments
- ◆ Don't talk too much...provide necessary support & clarify expectation

# Anxiety Plans

- ◆ Foster self-regulation and active coping
  - A. Self-monitoring
  - B. Self-relaxation and self-talk
  - C. Engage or distract them
  - D. Get through it....don't escape it
- Take a break (set limit)

# Additional Resources

- ◆ Read attached resources and references
- ◆ Speak with me
- ◆ Seek outside support for yourself, family members and/or student

# Doug's Contact Information

Scheduled weekly on Tuesday mornings  
(with a few exceptions)

(612) 702-9238

[DougAnderson@SolutionsAndStrengths.com](mailto:DougAnderson@SolutionsAndStrengths.com)