

Anchored—Not Anxious

Clark Stevens, PhD
Psychologist

Gen Z reports the highest overall stress
levels of any generation in America.

"Stress in America: Generation Z"
APA's 12th annual survey

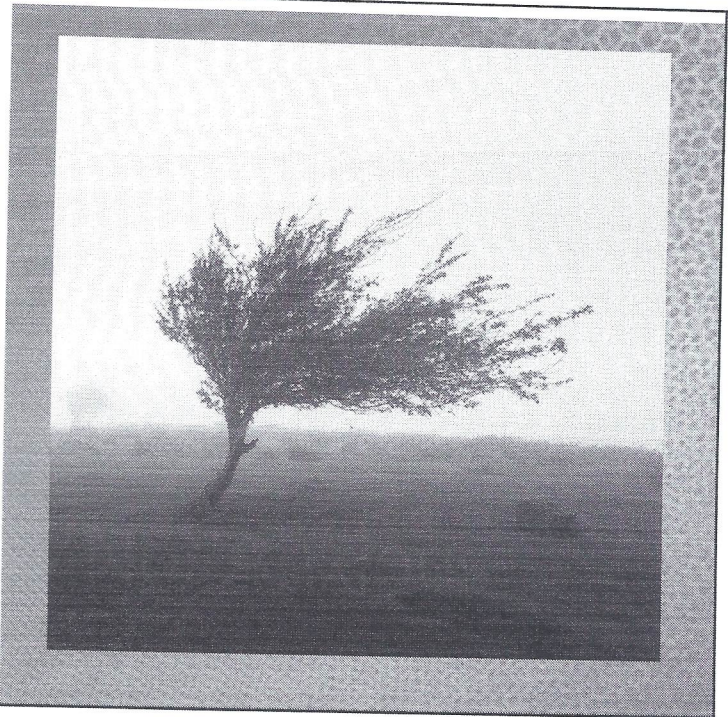
Anxiety diagnoses, in children ages 6-17,
increased by 29% between 2016 and
2020.

National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
2022

"Winds" (stress)

1. Social media / comparison culture

- Social media is a significant contributor to the adolescent mental health crisis.
-(US Surgeon General Advisory 2023)
- More than three hours per day on social media doubles the risk of anxiety and depression symptoms
- Average teenager in America is currently spending more than five hours a day on screens.



“Winds”

2. Academic pressure and achievement expectations

“Your worth is your performance”

3. Saturated with fear-based news
4. Reduced real-world competence opportunities
5. Parental anxiety transmission



Biosphere 2

Designed to be a perfect, self-sustaining world.

Complex ecosystem

- Rainforest
- Ocean
- Savanah
- Wetland

Controlled environment

- Temperature
- Light
- Soil Conditions



Problem = no wind

Thigmomorphogenesis

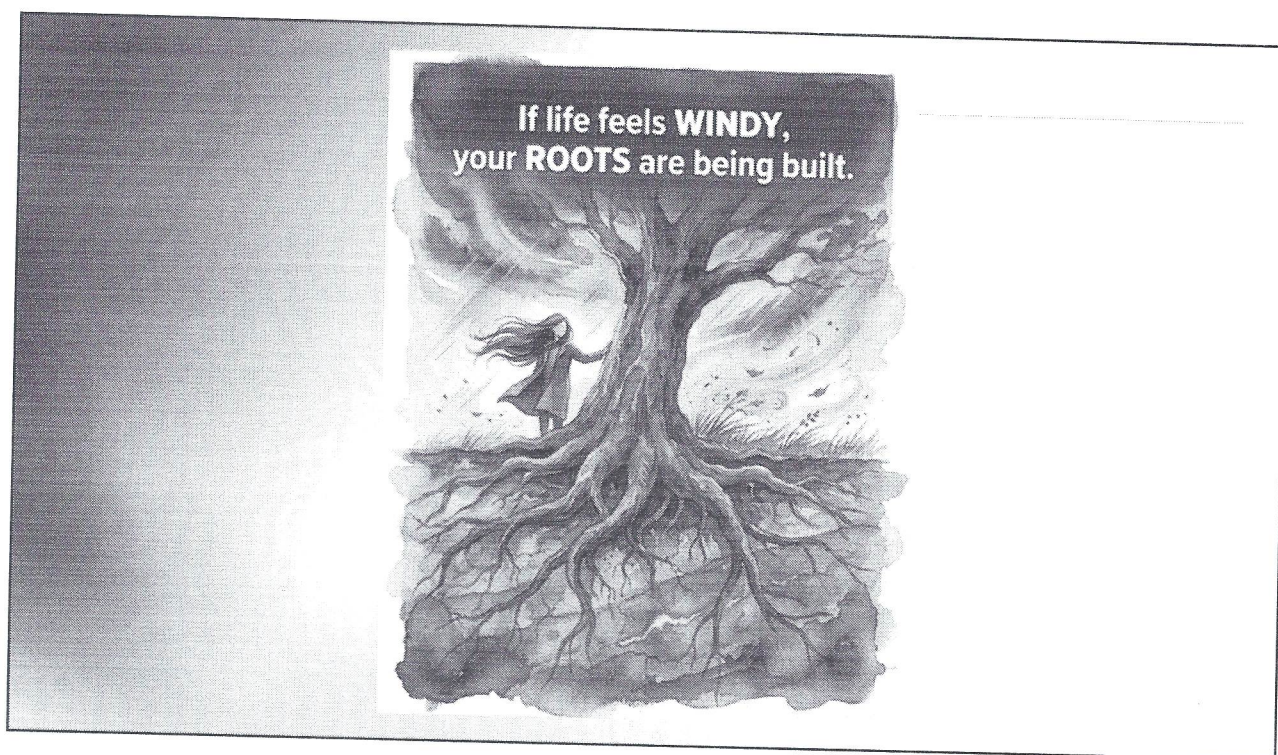
The process of developing “stress wood”

- Trees *respond* to the wind by becoming structurally stronger.
- The resistance is the mechanism.

Children need “wind”

“Wind” = manageable stress, frustration, uncertainty, and challenge
— in order to develop:

- distress tolerance
- frustration tolerance
- adaptive coping
- emotional flexibility
- problem-solving



"...but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

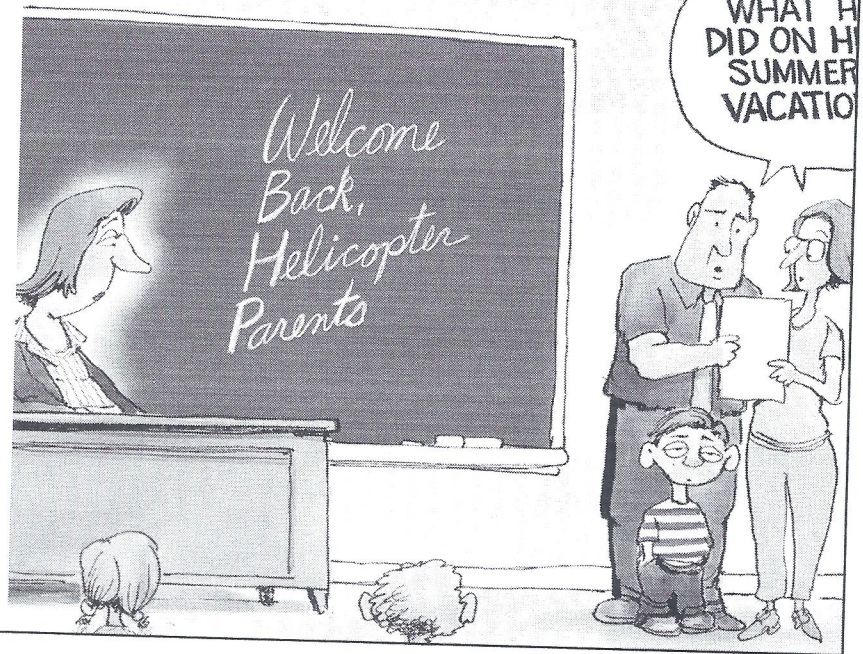
Romans 5:2-4

Helicopter Parenting

A well-intentioned, love-driven pattern of:

- Hovering
- Buffering
- Rescuing

Overprotective parenting predicts *higher* anxiety in children.



What is your “rescue instinct?”

Ask yourself these five questions when your instinct is to step in:

1. Is my child in genuine danger or distress — or just uncomfortable?
2. Am I stepping in because they need me, or because I need them to be okay right now?
3. If I solve this for them, what do they learn about their own capacity?
4. Am I taking away the exact struggle that would build the skill I want them to have?
5. Can I be present and supportive without taking over?

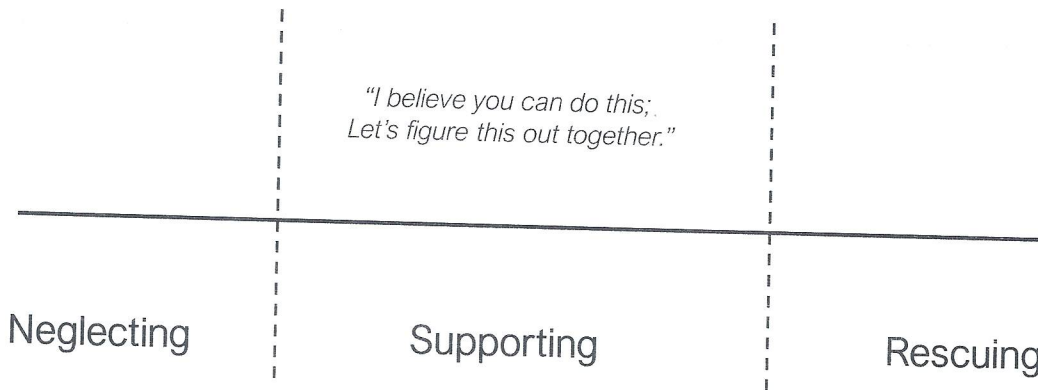
“What are the *appropriate winds* in your child’s life that you might be shielding them from?”

Overview

Anxiety grows in the absence of practiced struggle, connected relationship, and anchored identity.

1. “Practiced Struggle”
2. Connected Relationship
3. Anchored Identity

1. Supporting your Child's "Practiced Struggle"



Standing close enough so they are not alone, while stepping back enough so they discover their own capacity.

*"You will have to figure
this out on your own."*

*"I believe you can do this;
Let's figure this out together."*

*"You can't do this or figure
this out on your own."*

Neglecting

Supporting

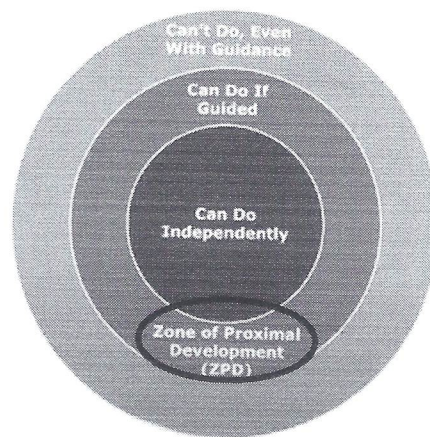
Rescuing

"Scaffolding"

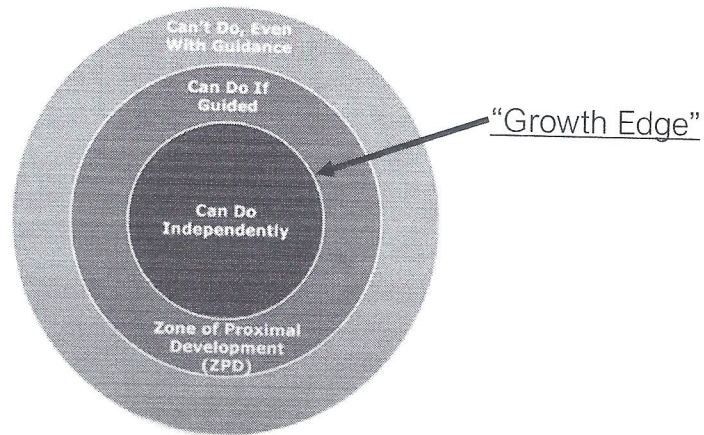
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a supportive framework for "practiced struggle"

ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT



ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT



Four-Step Scaffolding Sequence

Step 1 — ASSESS: Begin by asking honestly, "What can my child actually do right now?"

Step 2 — SUPPORT AT THE EDGE: Introduce a challenge just slightly beyond current capacity — with you present.

Step 3 — NARRATE THE PROCESS: Talk out loud about what you are doing and why.

Step 4 — WITHDRAW GRADUALLY: As competence grows, reduce your support.

- Let them struggle before you intervene—This is respectful, not neglectful.
- Display a hopeful belief that they can learn with effort.
- Withdrawing a little support at a time exposes them to success based on their own effort.

The Modeling–Partnering–Observing Sequence

Phase 1 — MODELING: *"I do it. You watch."*

Demonstrates a skill or task while the child observes.

Phase 2 — PARTNERING: *"We do it together."*

Parent and child tackle the challenge side by side.

You are coaching. You are encouraging. You are processing alongside them.

Do not take over. (The moment you take over, you move from partnering to rescuing.)

Phase 3 — OBSERVING: *"You do it. I watch."*

The child attempts the task while the parent steps back, observes, cheers the child's effort.

You are available. You are present. But you are not intervening unless it is truly necessary.

How to praise your child who is engaged in "struggle"

Performance Mindset

Growth Mindset

How to praise your child who is engaged in “struggle”

Performance Mindset

- Intelligence, talent, and ability are “fixed” —
 - You either have them or you don't.
- Praise that reinforces a “fixed mindset”:
 - *“You're so smart.”*
 - *“You are a natural.”*

Growth Mindset

How to praise your child who is engaged in “struggle”

Performance Mindset

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Growth Mindset

- Intelligence, talent, and ability are developed through effort, strategy, persistence, and learning from failure.
- Praise that cultivates a “growth mindset”:
 - *“I can see how hard you worked on that.”*
 - *“What did you learn from trying it that way?”*
 - *“I love watching how you don't give up on hard things.”*

Performance vs. Growth Mindset “outcomes”

Performance Mindset

Failure becomes terrifying—failure is a verdict on their identity

- “I am not smart enough.”
- “I am not good enough.”
- “I am not enough.”

Outcome? Every challenge was a threat to their identity:

- Anxiety heightened & performance worsened.
- Gave up more quickly.

Growth Mindset

Struggle becomes information rather than verdict.

- “I need a different strategy.”
- Failure means: “I learned something I need to know.”

Outcome? Hard working kids persisted.

- Hard work is “just part of the job.”
- Effort-praised kids outperform intelligence-praised students.

Story of Bob

- 19 year old
- High IQ
- Praised for being the smartest child in the family
- Never had to study to get good grades
- Achieved a 4.0+ in high school
- Freshman at an elite college
- Very sociable
- Loves Jesus and engaged in campus ministry

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- Freshman at an elite college
- Very sociable
- Loves Jesus and engaged in campus ministry
- Received a "D" on midterm in one class
- Immediately began questioning his intelligence and capacity
- Experienced severe anxiety when going to classes after this
- Withdrew into video gaming
- Grades deteriorated in all of his classes
- Withdrew from college at end of 2nd semester.

Story of Bob & Avoidance of Struggle

- "When failing exam in an "easy" class, 'If I can't do this and it was easy, how can I actually do difficult stuff.'"
- "Because I am as smart as I am, I guess I am really not smart enough to do this."
- "When hit with hard, I tell myself, 'I can't do it. I'm stupid.'"
- "I don't have the ability to push myself. I don't know how to."
- "I don't know how to ask for help. If I can't do it, I quit."

Practiced Struggle & Growth Mindset

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Perseverance must complete its work so that you may become mature and complete, not lacking in any good thing."

James 1:2–4 (NIV)

Practiced Struggle & Relationship Connection

*"...but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.
And hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."*

Romans 5:2–5

2. Relationship Connection

Providing your children *Secure Connection*

"I am with you"

*"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*

Isaiah 41:10

Circle of Security

Strengthening Relationship Connection with your Child

Secure Base

Sending your child out into the world:

- Child ventures out with confidence

Parental response:

- Be available
- Support their exploration
- Watch over & help when needed
- Delight in and enjoy your child
- Mirror their effort and strengths

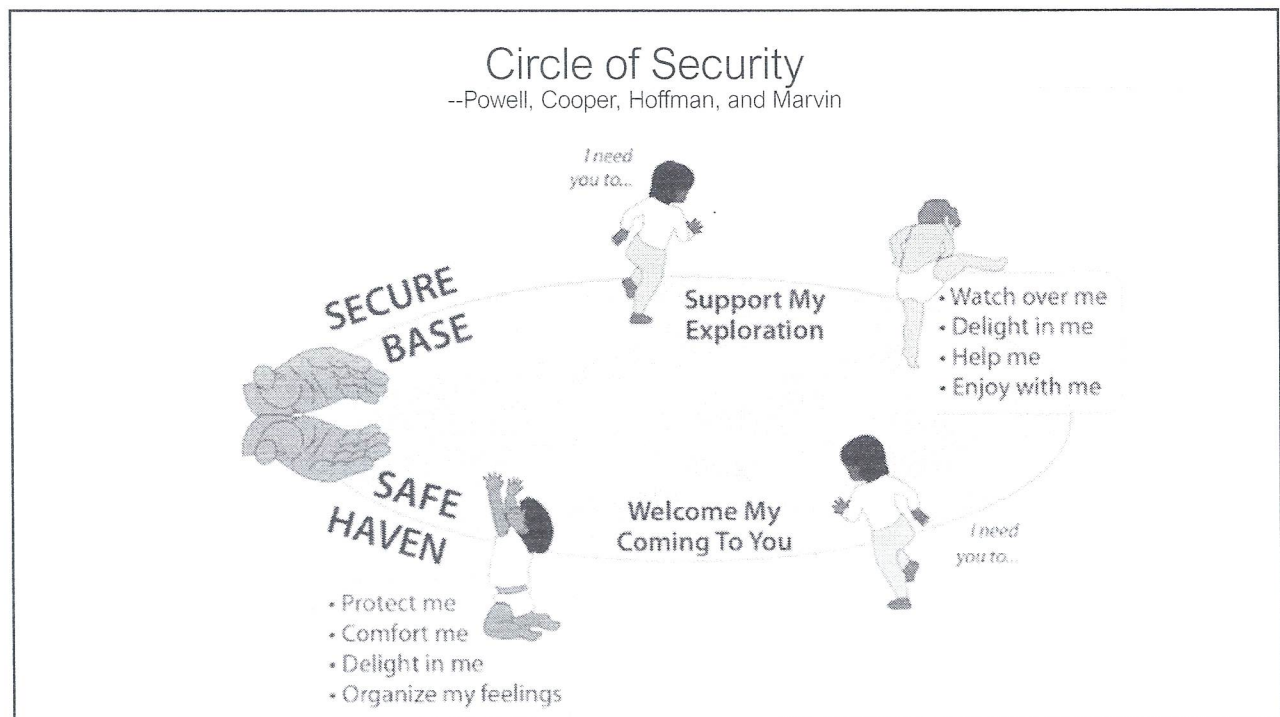
Safe Haven

Receiving your child back from the world:

- Child returns for comfort, encouragement, and support

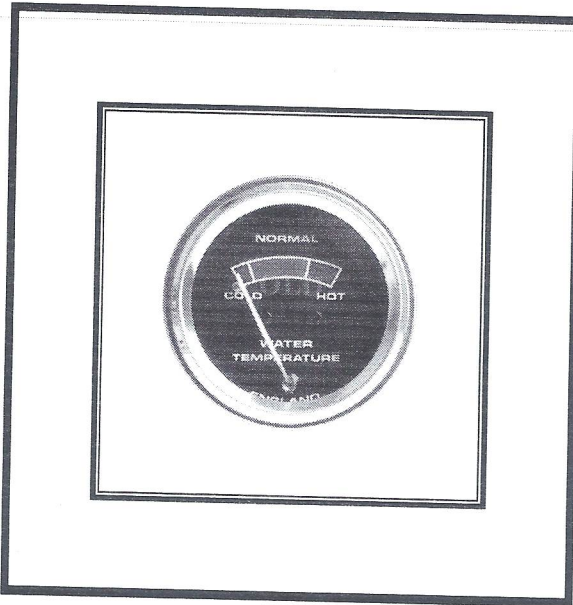
Parental response:

- Welcome you child coming to you for comfort and support
- Practice attunement and help child name their emotions and needs (co-regulation)





*Children who learn to distrust their own emotional
experience become adults who are
highly skilled at one thing:
anxiety.*



Monitoring Your Child's Emotions

"What are you feeling right now?"

Glad
Sad
Hurt
Fear
Anger
Lonely
Guilt
Shame

"Name it to tame it"

Daniel Siegel, MD

"What" questions

1. What just happened?
2. What emotions are you feeling? (glad, sad, fear, hurt, anger, lonely, guilt, shame)
3. What are your thoughts telling you? ("...about what happened, about me, about you?")
4. What are you needing right now?

The Phrase Bank

"I can see that really hurt."

"You don't have to have it all together right now. I'm right here."

"That was really big. Tell me what happened."

"Your feelings make sense. Let's figure them out together."

"I'm not going anywhere. Take all the time you need."

What NOT to say:

"Calm down." — Commands the feeling to stop without helping it resolve.

"Stop crying." — Teaches them that their emotional expression is unwelcome.

"You're fine." — Contradicts their lived experience. They are not fine.

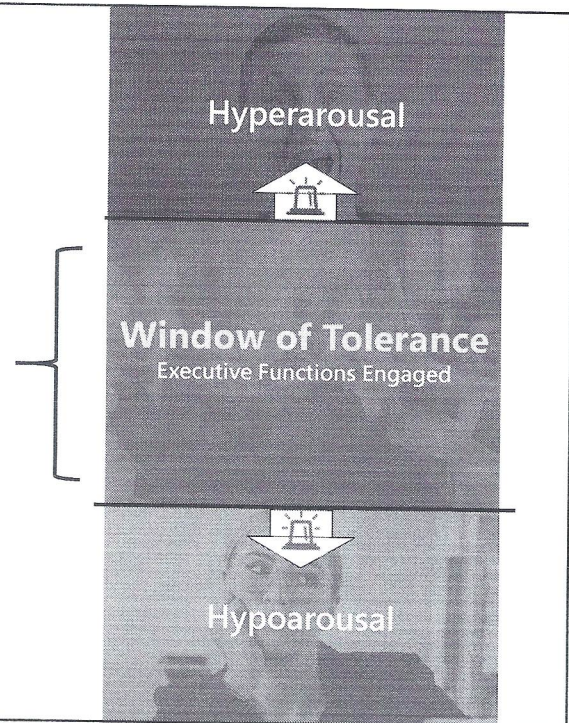
"It's not a big deal." — Invalidates the very experience that needs witnessing.

Window of Tolerance

Receptive State

Social Engagement System
Safety, Connection, Oriented to Environment

- Executive functions online
- Curiosity/openness
- Calmness in connection
- Compassionate
- Mindful/in the present
- Settled/grounded
- Innovative
- Playful



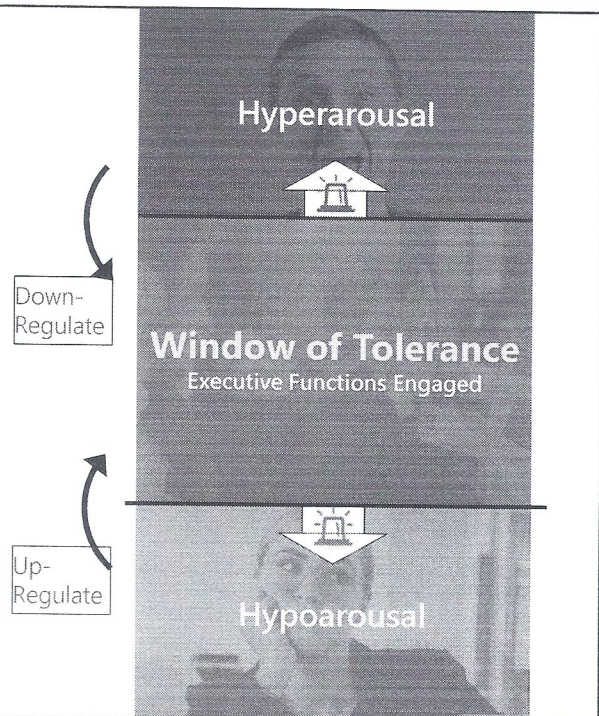
Co-Regulating Your Child's Brain

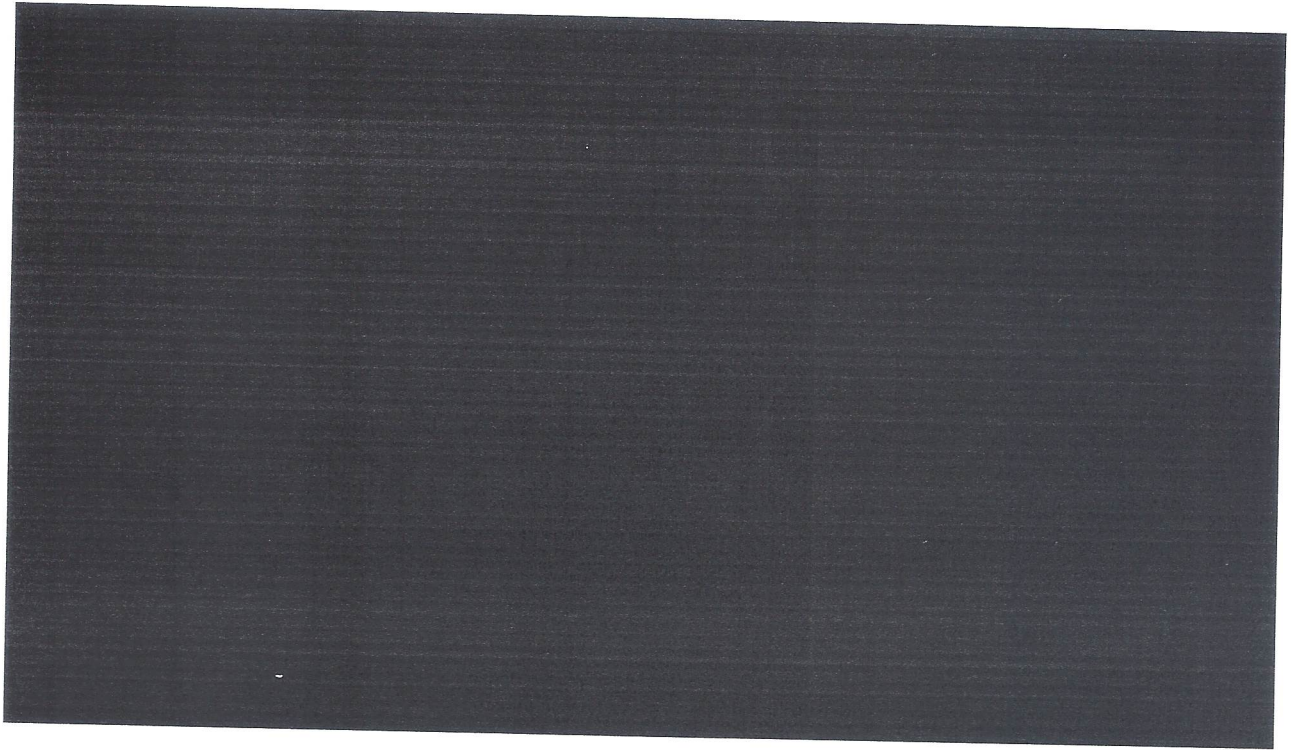
Down-Regulate Hyperarousal

- Slow down/Hit the brakes
- "Buy Time" (e.g., "Take 5")
- Breathing (double breath)
- Muscle relaxation, stretching
- Visual imagery
- Soothing music

Up-Regulate Hypoarousal

- Speed up/Hit the gas
- Movement—walking, exercise
- The Five Senses exercise (5-4-3-2-1)
- Sunlight, aroma, exposure to nature
- Energetic music





God & Co-Regulating Emotions

"Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge."

Psalm 62:8

"When I said, 'My foot is slipping,' your unfailing love, LORD, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy."

Psalm 94:18-19

"...the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

2 Corinthians 1:2-4

God & Circle of Security

Secure Base

"The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you...[and] rejoice over you with singing."
Zephaniah 3:17

"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go..." Genesis 28:15

Safe Haven

"He is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." Psalm 46:1

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
Matthew 11:28

3.

Anchored Identity

Anxiety is, at its root,
a question about the future and a question about the self.

Am I enough?

Does anyone see me?

Does my life matter?

Will I be okay?

Anchor 1 – “You are known”

“You have searched me and known me” – Psalm 139

“There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” – Romans 8:1

You are known, not for what you do, but for who you are.
God knows you completely.

Anchor 2 – “You are loved”

“Nothing can separate you from the love of God found in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans 8

You do not have to earn our love. You cannot lose it.
This is a small picture of how God loves you.

Anchor 3 – “You have purpose”

“You are Gods masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for you do.”

Ephesians 2:10

God made you on purpose, for a purpose. You are not an accident.
You are a masterpiece in progress.

Summary

Anxiety grows in the absence of practiced struggle, connected relationship, and anchored identity.

1. Encourage "Practiced Struggle" providing structured support.
2. Be their Secure Base AND Safe Haven.
3. Anchor them in their true identity: Known, Loved, and Created for Purpose by God

“Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed
shall you be when you go out.”

Deuteronomy 28:6

“The Lord bless you, and keep you, the Lord make his face
shine upon you and give you peace.”

Number 6:23