

Counseling Parents in Shepherding Their Anxious Child

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1. Current Statistics on Children and Anxiety

- A Northwestern Medicine survey analysis showed 10.6% of children and adolescents struggled with anxiety in 2022.¹
- A 2022 article from the APA states “over 20.5% of youth now struggle with anxiety.”²

It is helpful to keep in mind what is a developmental stage (i.e., separation anxiety) vs. a heart issue (anxiety that can be recognized, repented of, replaced).

2. Why Parents?

1. Called to be Primary Disciples [Deut. 6:6-7, Eph. 6:4, Psa. 78:4-8].
2. Can give care *in the moment* (helpful for kids when it’s hard to remember).
3. Can give reminders *often* (kids need this, reemphasized and reinforced).
4. It helps assess and care for the spiritual well-being of the whole home.

You will need to be clear that the counseling is just as much (if not more so) for the parents and change is expected of them too!

3. What Does Anxiety Look Like in Kids? (It’s not that different than adults!)

- Physical responses like faster breathing/increased heartrate/sweaty
- Getting quieter/withdrawing
- Bedtime or going to certain locations becomes harder
- Noticing behavior changes around different people
- Heightened emotions

Sliding scale: Concern > Worry > Anxiety > Fear > Panic

The root is still often:

- Desire for control
- Wanting people to like me
- Uncertainty of the future
- Wanting safety/security

4. What to Remember When Starting Out

1. Encouragement (Give Hope!)

A. For the Parents:

¹ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2832990>

² <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/child-anxiety-treatment>

- i. It's a good desire to want to help your child now – establishing habits.
- ii. God is giving you a Gospel opportunity in this, the same as any other struggle you or your child might face.
 1. This struggle is an *opportunity*, not an inconvenience!

B. For the Kids

- i. God is using this to grow you in trust and reliance on Him, for you to see a need for Him.

2. Patience (Give Perspective!)

A. For the Parents:

- i. Change does not usually happen overnight; this is a process.
- ii. Remember the Lord's patience toward you in your struggles and let this lead you to compassion (1 Tim. 1:16, Psa. 103:8).
- iii. We don't want to minimize the hard – we live in a fallen world with hard things! But we also want to give kids an eternal perspective in the midst of the hard.

B. For the Kids

- i. Practicing these habits starts out hard at times (Y-Chart) but becomes easier as we do them – and God is faithful to help when we ask! He delights in changing you to be more like His Son!

3. Influences and Info (Gather Good Data!)

A. For the Parents

- i. Data gathering is just as important for the parents as it is the child.
 1. You want to know all the details about this anxiety from both perspectives (parent and child) – think of the 5Ws:
 - a. Who is anxious?
 - b. What or how does anxiety look like for them? How does it manifest?
 - c. When and where are they likely to become anxious? What triggers it?
 - d. Why do THEY think they are anxious?
- ii. How do the parents respond to the child when they are anxious? How do the parents respond to their own difficult circumstances? Do they also get anxious? How is this modeled and responded to in the home?
 1. You may need to counsel a parent directly about this first.

B. For the Kids

- i. Assess what *can* change that helps a child? This is circumstantial, and may not be possible to change, but if so – let's do so.
 1. In the same way, if we counseled an adult who struggled with anxiety and they drank four cups of coffee and two energy drinks a day, we'd say something about that influence. It doesn't mean that we don't get to the root – but let's make the right thing easy if we can!

4. Motives (Aim for Heart Change!)

A. For the Parents

- i. Make sure they know the end goal: glorifying God. Not making life easier. Not lessening a child's suffering.
- ii. Teach them about the heart so that they can continue to bear this in mind – behavior change is a lot easier to go after.
- iii. Utilize Paul Tripp's questions³ get to the heart in circumstances where a child is anxious.
 1. What are you feeling?
 2. What thoughts are coming to mind?
 3. What are you wanting?
 4. Why do you want that?
 5. What was the result?
 - a. We want to be as specific as possible so they can change specifically too. Children articulate things differently depending on age, temperament, etc., but the more info you have, the easier it is to get to the heart – drawing that inner man out so you can help put off/renew/put on.

B. For the Kids

- i. Have the family watch the Idols of the Heart Videos together (or have the parents teach). Make sure the kids know about the heart too!

5. What to Consider As You Continue

GO SLOW!

1. Recognize God's Good Design

a. For the Parents

- i. We are physical beings as well as spiritual. Explain to kids what is happening with them physically.
 1. Ex: "God made your body to respond with rapid heart rate and heavy breathing because it helps you when you really are in danger. He's really thought of everything! But, because of sin, our bodies sometimes respond to things like we are in danger, even if we're not. It's good God made us this way. And you might still feel that way while you're learning to think through things differently and trust Him."
- ii. Helping kids to physically calm down may be a first step needed before addressing the heart issue.

b. For the Kids

³ *Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family*, Paul David Tripp

- i. Teach the Feelings Train - You can feel physically anxious, but still do what is right.

2. Focus on God's Attributes

a. For the Parents

- i. We want their children to replace the Fear of Other Things with the Fear (Awe) of God – so they need to get to know Him!
- ii. Make this an everyday part of life as much as is natural. Walk the neighborhood. Go on hikes. Notice things on your drive.
 - 1. Matthew 6:25-34 – look at the sparrows and the lilies.
 - a. Homework: Go outside, spend time in nature, talk about your favorite parts of Creation. How does this point back to God?
 - b. Ask simple questions to them to redirect their gaze.
 - 2. Story books and cards that go over attributes.
 - 3. Asking kids to identify what they learned about God during family Bible time.

b. For the Kids

- i. Nature journal.
- ii. Study an encyclopedia.
- iii. Interview someone older about seeing God's faithfulness in their lives.

3. Use Narratives of Scripture to Discuss and Relate

a. For the Parents

- i. Mark 4:35-41 – Jesus calms the storm [ask questions – was this easy or hard for God? How do you know that? What do you think about this re: your circumstances?]
- ii. Joseph (Genesis 37, 39-50) – How God is with him in injustice and suffering [How do you think Joseph felt? Have you felt that way? How did Joseph respond? Did Joseph know what was happening in the moment?]

b. For the Kids

- i. See Moses, Gideon, or Peter – you are not alone in your fear or anxiety! But the same God who was faithful to them is faithful to you too!
- ii. Psalm 56:3 – “When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.”

4. Use Specific Scripture to Combat Specific Fear

a. For the Parents

- i. Afraid at night? *Psalm 121:3b*
- ii. Afraid of what others think? *Proverbs 25:29*
- iii. Afraid of losing salvation? *John 10:28*

b. For the Kids

- i. Turn it into an art project
- ii. Hang it around the house
- iii. Learn it through a song

5. Put Anxious Thoughts to the Philippians 4:8 Test

a. For the Parents

- i. It says to fix your thoughts - you have to choose, and this takes practice.
- ii. Walk through the verse and ask kids some questions to help them determine if what they are dwelling on is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, worthy of praise – example:
 1. Is this a “what if” or has it actually happened?
 2. Am I worrying about tomorrow (James 4:14, Matt 6:34) or focused on today?
 3. Is this a serious thought or an exaggerated thought?
 4. Am I making a fair assessment?
 5. Is this focused on blessings or stinkin’ thinkin’?
 6. Am I considering who God is in this?
 7. Am I assuming the best?
 8. How can I change my thinking about this situation?
 9. If this thought is not worthy of praise, how can I turn and praise God through this situation?

6. Emphasize Prayer (Phil 4:6)

a. For the Parents

- i. They need to be regularly praying for their child.
- ii. They need to be regularly praying with their child.
- iii. Help their child understand repentance (1 John 1:9) – this is a gift. Lead them to pray for forgiveness when they don’t trust God.

b. For the Kids

- i. Pray through Scripture – Psalms 23 and 139 are great places to start!
- ii. Praise God through His attributes – taking the focus off of self and onto loving God.
 1. Use the ABCs as a help – God is Awesome, God is Beautiful, God is Creative, God is Divine, God is Eternal, etc.
- iii. Pray for Others – taking the focus off of self and onto loving their neighbor.
- iv. Make a thankfulness list (including for the hard)

7. Repeat, Reinforce, Reemphasize!

a. For the Parents

- i. Teach to your kids in numerous ways and through different learning styles (auditory, visual, kinetic).
 1. Verse Examples:
 - a. 2 Cor 10:5: use a fish net to scoop out and “capture” thoughts
 - b. 1 Pet 3:5: show a video of fly fishing and how long the “cast” is
 2. Diagram Examples:
 - a. Circles of Responsibility

- i. Talk through, show, use hands
 - b.** Tornado of Anxiety
 - i. Talk through, show, use glass of water/spoon/food color
 - c.** Feelings Train
 - i. Talk through, show, pull out the toys
- 3.** Utilize your Children's Ministry – ask for specific ideas!
- b.** For the Kids
 - i.** Music and Movement help!
 - 1.** Put verses to music (see resources) so kids have something ready and stored in their hearts as a resource.
 - 2.** Use movement to help it sink in

Scenario #1

You receive a call from Tommy’s mom – she is seeking help for her 10-year-old son who has not been himself since a bad car accident four months ago. Tommy had been riding with his best friend’s family when they were T-boned going through an intersection, and Tommy’s seat in the vehicle was greatly impacted. He was rushed to a nearby hospital and then transferred quickly to a Children’s Hospital for surgery to repair multiple fractures in his left leg and watch for brain bleeding after a concussion. The doctors stated that Tommy was “very lucky, but he has a long road to recovery.” Everyone else in the vehicle had various injuries, from mild to moderate, but all survived (including the driver of the other vehicle). Tommy’s mom, Kristy, fielded the initial phone calls and frantically went from one hospital to another trying to find him, but he was already in surgery by the time she reached the Children’s Hospital. Tommy’s dad, Bill, saw the missed calls coming out of a meeting and raced to join her. Kristy says it was the “most scared she’s ever been.” Tommy is currently using a scooter to get around and does physical therapy twice a week. Overall, he’s bouncing back physically very well. However, Kristy says he has become agitated and short in responses since the accident, but especially since school got out for summer, three weeks ago. She said neither she nor Bill can bring up the accident without him getting angry and he refuses to discuss it, so she is afraid he is internalizing trauma. You note from Tommy’s PDI that he is coming in “because his parents want him to talk through the accident,” and that he listed several sports and groups he is a part of through school and rec, but no church involvement other than Sunday mornings.

What are your initial observations?

What further questions do you have for Tommy and/or his parents?

How would you begin to minister to this family?

Scenario #2

Penny is a child in your 4th grade Sunday School class. You've always found her to be a polite, helpful kid, but not especially close with anyone else in the class. Her dad, Richard, pops in last at pick up and asks if he can chat. He wonders if you've noticed anything lately about Penny being argumentative. He admits Penny has always been their "easy" child who follows the rules, is responsible, studious – but lately she's been quick to correct her siblings (and even parents at times), and dissolves into tears if she receives any criticism. Getting a bad grade the previous week on a quiz kept her up at night obsessing over the results. Is this something that's been noticed here at church too, he wonders, and have you seen this phase in other kids? Penny is their oldest and they haven't run into this before. He shares they run a pretty "tight ship" at home, but they've never told Penny she has to have perfect grades, and he's not sure where to go from here. You try and think of any specifics where you might have seen this – and you remember last week when Penny mentioned that she's "asked Jesus into her heart lots of times, just in case," and you gently let her know that salvation happens just once – but you realize now looking back on the situation that she got very quiet and seemed unhappy the remainder of class, and now you wish you would have spent more time on this.

What are your initial observations?

What further questions do you have for Penny and/or her parents?

How would you begin to minister to this family?

Scenario #3

Jackson's mom, Diana, reached out to you at church on a Sunday – she's wondering if you have any tips for a child who is struggling with fear at night? She explains that Jackson, age 7, has been having nightmares at night over the last few months that are keeping them both up, and she's exhausted. She's a single working mom, and she doesn't have many people to talk to about this situation and feels lost. Bedtime has become a huge battle because Jackson doesn't want to go to sleep. When he wakes and refuses to go back to sleep, Diana feels like she responds in frustration more than understanding because she always has at the back of her mind how much sleep she's losing and how hard that's going to make the next day. As you ask about their home life, she admits that their schedule is a little all over the place – she works a full-time job while Jackson is at school. After school, he spends a couple of hours with his grandmother watching the news and eating snacks before Diana picks him up, and then at home she tries to fit in some hours on the computer with side work to make extra money to “get ahead” in their finances – which means their routine is often moving around depending on the day, and often multi-tasked. Bedtime used to be consistent, but with the extra battle it's been lately, Diana has taken to pushing things off and letting Jackson watch extra TV or playing video games at night instead so she can fit work in.

What are your initial observations?

What further questions do you have for Jackson and Diana?

How would you begin to minister to this family?

Resources

Videos/Diagrams (<https://www.canyonhillscounseling.org/childrens-diagrams>):

- Idols of the Heart (Part A & B)
- Tornado of Anxiety
- Circles of Responsibility
- Feelings Train

Books:

- “Walking with God When I’m Afraid: 30 Biblical Anchors for Anxious Young Hearts” (Witmer)
- “Zoe’s Hiding Place: When You are Anxious” (Powlison)
- “Halle Takes a Stand: When You Want to Fit In” (Tripp)
- “Helping Your Anxious Child” (Lowe, booklet)

Worship/Verse Resources:

- Seed Family Worship
- Slugs and Bugs

Podcasts:

- NatTheo: Nature Lessons Rooted in the Bible
- Tiny Theologians

General recommendations (not hard and fast, but guidelines) of what to consider when working directly with children:

1. They need to fill out the paperwork (to the best of their ability).
 - a. If they can't fill it out, they probably aren't old enough for "regular" counseling, and working with parents is best.
 - b. It helps to hear their heart directly.
2. Get to know their interests – you have to forge a bond that isn't naturally there.
 - a. Collect data from PDI, call or meet with parents ahead of time.
3. Build relationship and trust.
 - a. While getting to know them, play a game or do an activity (Uno, coloring books, etc.), enjoy a favorite snack, talk about their interests (even if you have to do some research ahead of time).
4. Parents should be present and involved – this is training for them, data gathering for you, and helps the child to feel more comfortable.
 - a. The exception to this would be if you suspect abuse.
 - b. Involvement may depend a lot on age and maturity – a teen with a professed faith of their own may be ready to meet alone with a counselor (with the counselor checking in with the parents at other times), versus a young child who needs the parents to be present the whole time.
5. Keep is short, sweet, and simple
 - a. Sessions should not be the typical hour until they are an age where the attention span can warrant this. You will lose engagement.
 - b. Walk, move around, sit on the floor, take a stretch break
 - c. Focus in on 1-2 verses or topics in teaching and expand on them – do not jump around or cover too much too quickly – keep things simple and let them soak in.
6. Call it "projects for growth" (or something similar), instead of "homework." That word doesn't usually come with joy for kids. 😊