



Our Style of Parenting May Contribute to Emotional Problems in Kids

When our kids are anxious, it's important how we respond.

Seeing if parenting practices might be associated with increased risk of childhood anxiety and depression in young kids, was the aim of a recent study by researchers from New Zealand and Australia. The researchers used data from a large-scale community survey of mothers and fathers to examine the prevalence and association of emotional symptoms in children aged between 4 and 7 years, as they made the transition to primary school.

Parents were asked about how they responded to anxious or distressed behaviour of their children, including:

1. ignoring the distress by not giving any attention;
2. holding, cuddling or using physical contact to settle or calm the child;
3. telling the child to stop being so silly;
4. talking to the child in a soothing way until the fear has passed;
5. allowing the child to avoid the thing he or she is scared of; and (6) encouraging the child to be brave.

Those parenting reactions that were identified as being associated with childhood anxiety and depression were rejection (#3) and control (#5). Rejection was characterised by negative and hostile feelings and behaviours towards a child, including criticizing and minimizing the child's feelings. Parental control included behaviours designed to protect the child from real or imagined harm, and included excessive regulation of a child's activities and routines,

overprotection and intrusive parental decision making and direction of the child's reactions and feelings.

KEY FINDINGS

- Parental warmth and responsiveness is an appropriate response to a child's distress and has a protective influence on a child's adjustment.
- Strategies likely to enhance children's coping skills such as encouraging the child to be brave, protect against the development of emotional problems.
- Messages parents receive from their friends, family, child's school and community are likely to be powerful means of support to parents in their child rearing role.
- For mothers and fathers, low levels of consistency in dealing with their child's misbehaviour and low levels of confidence in responding to anxious or distressed behaviour were related to a greater likelihood of elevated emotional symptoms.
- Greater paternal and maternal stress and depression were related to a child's emotional problems.
- For mothers only, low levels of feeling supported in their parenting role by family and friends was related to elevated child emotional symptoms.
- Fathers who reported that they were likely or very likely to encourage their child to be brave and mothers who used physical contact to calm their child were less likely to rate their child in the clinical range for emotional symptoms.

THINGS YOU CAN DO

- ✓ Have confidence in your parenting and be consistent when it comes to consequences for misbehaviour.

- ✓ Acknowledge your child's feelings and encourage them to talk about whatever is troubling them. Being critical or dismissive of anxiety or labelling the behaviour as 'silly' only leads to further stress for the child.
- ✓ For younger children, help them to develop an emotional vocabulary.
- ✓ Talk openly with your child about things that make you anxious as an adult, role model coping skills, teach coping strategies to your child.
- ✓ Resist becoming a helicopter parent. Overprotecting and micromanaging your child's behaviour, routines and decision making, means that your child is denied independence and opportunities to mature. If they don't experience the feelings associated with stress and anxiety, they can't develop appropriate ways to cope.

Source: Dittman et al., *An Epidemiological Examination of Parenting and Family Correlates of Emotional Problems in Young Children*, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 2011, Vol. 81, No. 3, 360-371.

TAKEAWAY

FROM PROFESSOR MICHAEL BERNARD
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All young children, at some time, will experience distressing emotions and anxiety, particularly when making the transition from home to daycare, preschool or primary. How we respond as parents is vital to how they cope as kids. Our role as parents is to acknowledge that their anxiety is appropriate and their feelings are real. It's up to us to provide encouragement, support and help to learn life-long coping strategies.