

# THE DANGERS OF PARENTAL ANXIETY

Whilst it is only natural for parents to worry, many parents have cornered the market on anxiety - often unrealistically. The worry list is long: instilling proper diet and exercise habits; their child's friendships and school performance; crime, abduction and abuse; online threats (such as internet bullying and pornography); the potential impact of current economic and political factors on their child's future...and the list goes on. In many cases anxiety regarding these factors paralyzes both the parent and the child, making children fearful and stifling their curiosity and development.

Parental anxiety, whilst often well intended, limits children's opportunities to indulge in healthy activities, such as playing outside with friends or walking to school without being under a parent's watchful eye. These sorts of restrictions prevent children from exploring their world; interacting with peers freely; and learning to take chances and risks. Restrictions, based on parental anxieties, also tend to diminish children's opportunities to learn from their own mistakes<sup>1</sup>. Parents who allow their children to cope with day-to-day stressors, but who offer emotional and practical support, help their child to develop resilience and strategies for coping. Anxious and overprotective parents, who take responsibilities away from their child, are however more likely to increase the risk of childhood anxiety disorders developing.

Research indicates that children are more likely to show symptoms of anxiety and depression when their parents are unnecessarily strict; use high levels of guidance; provide little scope for their child to develop independent action; and limit their child's ability to experience natural consequences<sup>2</sup>. Parental anxiety and overprotection have also been found to stunt individuals' growth, as parents do not allow their child to successfully deal with fear. The overprotective or anxious parent is one who never seems to let his or her child do anything, and if the child is allowed to do something, it is only done with careful supervision from that parent and also a large amount of unnecessary rules. The parent is worried that his or her child will get hurt, and this parent is dealing with that worry by rationalizing that it is good for children to not get hurt. Part of being an adult is being able to deal effectively with life's setbacks, and this is something that needs to be taught from a young age. Not letting a child get hurt, speaking in physical and emotional terms, is detrimental to the child as he or she will not be familiar with a number of situations in life; experience increased anxiety as a result of this; and not have had practice getting back on to his or her own feet after a setback.

The desire to protect stems from a seemingly good intention, but it can have profound long-term effects on the child. Severely overprotected children will have a hard time moving out into the world and finding a spouse, job, or place to live because they are not used to having to do things on their own. Their parents have always been there to make decisions and assist with emergency situations on their behalf. Parents cannot however ask a girl out on a date, perform a job interview, or pay the bills for the remainder of their child's life. These are things that a child needs to learn how to do on his or her own.

The appropriate way for parents to raise their children is to allow the children to be hurt and experience life's ups and downs, but not so much so that the child is overwhelmed. When a child needs help, the parent should be there to help, the parent should not however take the steps for the child; instead he or she should help the child understand what is good to do and let the child take his or her own steps<sup>3</sup>. There needs to be a limit on parental anxieties so that they don't dominate and parents are able to give children the opportunities and freedoms to explore, be responsible and grow independent<sup>1</sup>.

For a list of references and links to more information on this topic please visit <http://www.christinedarney.co.za/Psych-Ed/psych-ed.html>

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