

Parenting through Overwhelm & School Avoidance

LISTENING & RESPONDING

The “Do”

The first step is to hear your child out. Active listening involves both hearing them and asking questions. Simple techniques to helping your child feel heard include:

1. Summarizing the content of what you have heard, then
2. Summarizing the feeling behind the story, then
3. Asking if they feel understood

“I heard you saying that you do not like PE because it is really loud and there are many people in the class. It sounds like it is chaotic, and in class you may be feeling overwhelmed and scared. am I understanding you correctly?”

The “Do Not”

Do not discount the fear. Rationality plays a minimal role in anxiety. Questions or comments in this context such as, “*Why is this such a big deal to you?*” or “*Everyone feels nervous sometimes*” may cause your child not to trust you with their reality of their experience. You may notice that your child does not feel safe to share if they are giving you answers such as, “*I don’t know,*” “*I’m not sure.*”

There may be a time or place for these thoughts, but not in this context and not right now.

Opt for “what are you scared of?” Avoid saying, “There’s nothing to be scared of.”

BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS

The “Do”

Consistency is key.

Maintain boundaries and expectations with your child just as you would if your child did not have anxiety. The trick here is to simply move at a slower pace if needed, or move forward with smaller steps. This allows brief time for psychological adjustment to the expectation, and for acknowledging that seemingly small steps are more difficult for your child or teen. For example, you may reward a non-anxious child with getting an “A” on a class presentation. You may consider rewarding an anxious child with the steps it takes to prepare for the presentation;

1. Practicing at home
2. Practicing at school
3. Going to school that day, etc.

This teaches your child that managing their anxiety is doable, and to be patient with taking small steps when needed.

The “Do Not”

Avoid the situation.

Just as a child can learn to manage their anxiety, they can also learn the path of seemingly least resistance; avoidance. Avoidance can become a comfortable, safe place, and the longer it lasts, the harder it can be to break. Parents sometimes report that once the avoidance option is on the table, the journey back to facing the fear is perceived by the child as disciplinary, rather than supportive.

GOAL-SETTING & INCENTIVES

The “Do:”

Goal set with your child/teen, and help **them** stick to **their** plan.

What do you hope for? Motivational Interviewing ☆ is a technique that works well here. Ask your child what their short term and long term goals are and how someone might reach a similar goal. It can be as simple as getting up at 6am, or as complex as becoming a doctor.

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☆**Motivational Interviewing** is a methodical line of questioning that helps people find their internal motivation to resolve ambivalent feelings/insecurities. The 5 principles of MI include:

1. Express empathy through reflective listening.
 - “I hear that school is overwhelming right now, and it must be difficult for you.”
2. Develop discrepancy between the goal and the current behavior.
 - “Your goal is to do well in school, but we can’t reach that goal if you don’t go.”
3. Avoid argument and direct confrontation.
 - “You’re upset with me for making you go. Let’s talk again during a calm moment.”
4. Adjust to resistance, rather than directly opposing it.
 - “It sounds like you are looking for options other than attending school, tell me more.”
5. Support self-efficacy and optimism.
 - “I know you can do it. I know the goals you have for yourself and I will help you to accomplish them, even if that means making the decision for you to go to school when its uncomfortable for you. I have seen you meet some big challenges in life before and you did great!”

The “Do Not”

Impose goals on your child, or discount small ones. Buy-in is crucial at this stage, because fear is a powerful feeling.

The “Do:”

Reward progress on a scheduled basis. Let your child or teen know in advance the incentives that are available for each step that has been reached. Again, your child’s input here is crucial. Make a list of rewards and incentives. Match small rewards with small steps, and big incentives with big goals reached.

For example, a family game night at home would match well with a small accomplishment such as completing their assignments for the night. A day-long outing is a large reward that could pair well with getting ready on time every day and attending a full week of classes.

HELPING WITH COPING

The “Do:”

Routine! Practice healthy habits on a schedule.

- Make a sleep schedule, no electronics, chart time
- Work in time for fun/movement
- Eat healthy
- Eliminate (or reduce) energy drinks/caffeine/drugs/alcohol
- Homework and reading daily
- Boundaries and time limits with technology
- Make a coping box and include items that support your child such as: journal and pens, essential oils, positive notes, coloring pages, a fidget toy, tea/cocoa, scented lotion, a book, hard candy, putty, heating pad, etc.

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The “Do Not”

Do not make avoidance comfortable.

If your child is staying home for the day, eliminate electronics and time to lounge. Make expectations and routines predictable and clear. Make sure that the schedule stays the exact same, with wake up and bedtimes the same. Make a list of chores and homework for your child and continue to check in. Schedule and activity, their day at home should mirror a day at school. *remember, being at school is much more helpful than staying home. If your child is staying home sick, consider scheduling an appointment with their doctor or other provider. Stomach aches, headaches, and other somatic symptoms are often related to anxious overwhelm which is directly connected to avoidance.

Thoughts to Consider:

- Attending school and getting an education is not something to be negotiated. However, when a child is refusing school, it can be helpful to identify their goals and help them to develop a system of incentives to help them re-engage.
- Not going to school has many short term rewards- playing video games at home, lounging all day, avoiding fears. Eliminate the rewards at home so that the behavior will shift and your child will re-engage with school.
- Communicate with your school. Let them know there is an issue at the beginning, and don't put it off until your child is already very far behind. Catching up can be more emotionally difficult for your family.

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Below are some tools that can be used as you collaborate with your child and as you implement these strategies with your child.

The C.A.L.M. Communication Technique

C - CONNECT

This is where you really connect with your kid. It's a true connection with your child. You put your phone down and you use your body to indicate that you are deeply listening to your child.

A - AFFECT

This is affect matching. Your child looks sad, you look sad. If they look scared, you look scared. You may not be experiencing the same emotions but you're letting them know that you really understand their experience in that moment. Don't tell them how they should be feeling, or try to fix it as that could escalate their distress.

L - LISTEN

Paraphrase, clarify and summarize or wonder out loud all with that affect. That way you can really listen to what your child is saying — have them feel that they've really been heard.

M - MIRRORING

Sit in the moment with your child and let them share what they are feeling. Empathize but don't try to fix it. You want your child to feel like you are the person who really gets them.

INCENTIVES

Small

Medium

Large

Small	Medium	Large

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GOAL:

Incentive:

Step:

Incentive:

Step:

Incentive:

Step:

Incentive:

GOAL:

Incentive:

Step:

Incentive:

Step:

Incentive:

Step:

Incentive:

Schedule:

Morning	Day	Evening
6am	Noon	6pm
7am	1pm	7pm
8am	2pm	8pm
9am	3pm	9pm
10am	4pm	10pm
11am	5pm	11pm