

How Parents Can be the ‘Facilitators of Brave’. Anxiety in children and teens: Why their courage starts with ours.

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Our children see us at our best and at our most vulnerable. It's easy to think that they don't come together. It's easy to think that for them, our 'best' are the things that feel good for them – our depth of love for them, the way their name sounds when it's floating on our voice, our laugh when it's threading through theirs, the way we hold them close, the way the world feels better when we sit cross-legged on the floor beside them. The truth though, is that our most vulnerable times can also be our best for them – not despite them, but because of them.

Our children will see us when we are exhausted, frightened, sad, angry, and when the seams of our world start to heave a little. They will know that sometimes we have to do hard things and that sometimes we feel the strain of it all. They might not know the details of these times, but they will see them. As difficult as these times can be, they can also be the most exquisite, growthful times for our children – because when they see us move through the things that feel bigger than us, it opens the way for them to do the same. But there's something else. It's

not just the way we deal with *our* anxiety that opens their world, it's the way we deal with theirs, and our capacity to be with them when they are anxious without needing them, or it, to be different for a while.

It's tough to do. When our children are hurting we will feel it big. The depth of that feeling can move us with warrior force to protect them from the things that are fuelling their distress. Sometimes though, this 'protection' is the very thing that will keep their anxiety plumped up and well-fed.

Anxiety is one of two things.

Anxiety is a reaction one of two things. Sometimes, it is a reaction to a real threat, such as a situation or person that is genuinely unsafe. This is anxiety doing its job. Most often though, anxiety is not a reaction to a real threat, but a reaction to something important and meaningful. The risk of messing up, or missing out on, that important meaningful thing can be enough to register in the brain as a threat, and trigger anxiety in our children – but anxiety doesn't stop there. Their anxiety or distress will trigger ours. We're wired for this and it's been this way since the beginning of humans. It's the attachment system, and it's how we keep our young ones safe.

When our children are distressed or anxious, our own fight or flight response mobilises us to keep them safe. When their anxiety is a reaction to a real threat, keeping them safe will be exactly the right thing to do. Then there are the other times. When their anxiety is a reaction to something meaningful or important, our own anxiety can inadvertently move us to 'protect' them from the things that will be good for them.

There are plenty of ways this might happen. It might look like supporting avoidance (such as avoidance of school or trying new things), overly supporting them or speaking for them, or rearranging situations or experiences to ease their anxiety. This is when anxiety can lead to us moving them out of the way, not of threat, but of the important, meaningful things that can grow them.

The same response that can lead us to overprotect can also be their way to brave.

When the attachment system is triggered, it can inadvertently stifle brave behaviour. But there is something else the attachment system does. It grants us the most lavish power to help our children move through anxiety to brave behaviour – but their courage will have to start with ours.

Here's how it works. Our own capacity for courage, calm, and resilience forms a baseline for ourselves and for our children. It is difficult to elevate our children beyond our own levels. Some children will grow to be braver and more resilient than their parents, but the climb from

that baseline will be tougher than it needs to be because they will be doing it on their own. The power of our belief in them is transformational. It won't always feel that way, and it won't always feel as though they believe it, but it is.

You've believed in them through their self-doubt and distress many times before, and they've grown because of this. Think about when they were learning to walk. They would have bumped and bruised over and over. But you know they could do it, so you made sure they kept trying. They might not have always wanted this. There might have been plenty of times when they asked to be carried, but there would also have been plenty of times you refused – not every time, but enough times – because you knew they had it in them to walk. You didn't protect them from walking. You didn't carry them everywhere to protect them from the sting of another fall. Because of this, and because of the strengthening that came with every fall, they learned to walk. Their 'brave' looks different now, but they still need you to believe with everything in you that they can do it – just like you did then, and just like you have plenty of times since.

First, they will be asking, 'Do you see me?'

When anxiety is a reaction to something important and meaningful, 100% of those times will come with an offer to be brave. Whether our children choose brave or whether they choose to retreat into safety will often be guided by our response.

They will look to you first because as their attachment person, they have granted you the authority to guide them and lead them. It doesn't mean it will be easy, and it doesn't mean they will always willingly take your lead, but they will look to you.

This isn't about ignoring their anxiety. Anxiety has been doing its thing for a long time. It's there to protect them and it won't release its hold until it knows it's been seen. Anxiety is more likely to rest when it believes that we can see the situation with clarity and in full awareness. 'I know this feels scary.' 'I know you're so worried about what might happen if it doesn't work out.'

When they are in the midst of anxiety, first they will be asking, 'Do you see me?' By this, they mean – do you understand how big this feels, or how scary this feels for me right now? Let them know you do. 'I can see how big this feels for you.' This validation has to feel real. For a moment, they will need you to see what they see and feel what they feel. For just a moment try to meet them at the heart of that feeling that is overwhelming them.

Then, they will be asking, 'Am I safe?'

At its heart, 'Am I safe?' is asking, 'Do you think I can/should do this?' Our children are constantly looking to us for signs of safety. Those signs of safety are their launchpad into brave behaviour. When we trust that they will be safe *enough* to be brave *enough*, or that they will be okay *enough* if things don't go to plan, we elevate that launchpad and set it

closer to those important, meaningful things. Our courage, resilience, and power, becomes fuel for theirs. Sometimes, it will bridge the distance between their anxious feelings and brave behaviour just enough to make those important, meaningful things possible. Sometimes, it will be the difference between them being able to move towards those things, and not.

Then, when we are asking them to be brave, we go first. In the face of their anxiety, and ours, when focus on their capacity for brave, we start to shift their focus there too. 'I know it's scary and I know it feels bigger than you, and ...

- 'I know you can do this. What can you do that was braver than last time.'
- 'I know you can get the job done. What is one small thing you can take towards that important thing.'
- 'I know that whatever happens, you're going to be okay. I just love that you're giving it a go.'
- 'I know it feels scary right now, so what you can do that would feel brave?'

Think of it like this ...

Imagine you and a friend have been lunching at the same table under the same big, beautiful tree for years. One day, the tree is chopped back and your table is now in the blazing sun. On too many days, the heat feels brutal. Your shady breaks have now become sweaty ones, so you ask your friend to find a different table for you both. Your friend says nope. A different table might be noisy, crowded – ugh, so many things. 'So,' says your friend, 'let's just stay at this table'.

But you know this table isn't right for either of you, so you keep asking your friend to come to a different table. Your friend doesn't budge. You keep asking, your friend keeps refusing, so you stay at the same table every day – until the day comes that you get up from the table. You know there is a better table for you both and you find it, but getting up from the table feels awful. Your friend is really upset about the change and you hate seeing her like this, but something else has happened. By getting up from the table, you've made it impossible for things to stay the same. Eventually, your friend joins you at the new table because shifting tables was better – not easy, but slightly better – than staying the same.

When it comes to supporting brave behaviour in our children, sometimes we need to get up from the table first. We are asking them to be brave, but we need to be brave first. This means easing our own anxiety enough so we can move them through theirs. To do this, we need to look at what we might be doing that feels as though we are supporting our children, but which are actually letting anxiety have its way. These will be the things we do to stop their anxiety or distress, without the move towards brave. These things always come from a place of deep love, and honestly, I've done all of them myself – but they aren't helpful and

they can keep anxiety well-fed and plumped up. As parents, we have a choice – we can align ourselves with the fear and ‘give in’ to anxiety, or we can align ourselves with the brave. One will turn our children towards those important, meaningful things, and one will turn them away.

Here’s how it works.

With everything we do, there is a force for change and a force for same. We – all of us – will only change when the force for change gets bigger than the force for same. With anxiety, the force for same is around wanting to retreat into safe. The force for change is wanting to move towards brave. By doing things that accommodate anxiety, we feed the force for same and give it more leverage than the force for change. We make it easier for our children to retreat back into safety rather than make the move towards brave.

Anxiety is fierce. It feels awful, and when it comes at our children with full force, it’s completely understandable that they won’t feel safe enough to move through it. There will also be nothing in us that feels okay about moving them through it – but it’s exactly what we have to do. When we go first – when we calm our anxiety enough to get up from the table, we can give the force for change (the wish to be brave) a little more of what it needs to rise. It doesn’t mean that change will feel okay, but it will make it more likely. Most often, this might look like removing avoidance as an option, and planning the small steps towards brave.

But it won’t be easy. Important, meaningful things rarely are.

When our children are in the midst of anxiety, we will often feel as though our hearts are beating outside of ourselves. We will feel their vulnerability and their distress as though it is our own – and part of it will be. It’s why moving young people through anxiety feels so awful. There is nothing that feels okay about watching a child or teen in distress. The temptation to scoop them up and lift them over the heartache of it all will feel monumental, but what they need most of all in that moment is for us to believe in them. When they are focussed on the threat – which is what anxiety will do – they will need us to focus them on that important, meaningful thing and believe in their capacity for brave.

There might be a big part of you that won’t truly believe they can move forward or cope if things don’t go to plan. This is okay – it makes sense – but it’s more likely to be a reflection of how they are feeling, not what they are actually capable of. Often this is their anxiety, recruiting your anxiety, and focusing you on what *they* believe. This is when they will need you to shift their focus towards what *you* believe. Beneath any fear, frustration or the longing for them to feel safe, you know they are strong. You’ve seen it. So when everything in you is telling you to move them back into safety, let your calm and courage lead theirs.