


Making Sense of Anxiety in Kids

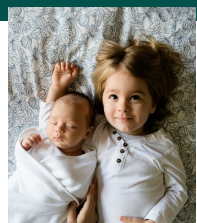
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Understanding alarm as an emotion



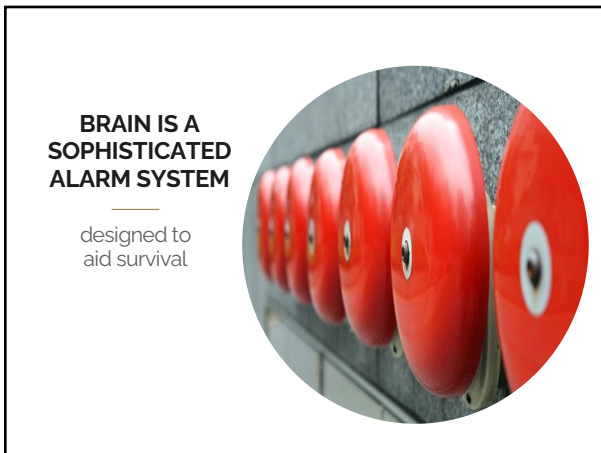
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**Anxiety isn't a thinking problem.
It's an emotional one — alarm.**

*The more we push emotions away,
the bigger the emotional problems become...*

Not about more coping	Not about pursuing calm	Not about brain science	Not about bravery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What should we tell our worried thoughts to make them go away? • Let's change the brain ads • Do your best and think positive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are safe • Let's just breath • Calm down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would brain science tell us is happening here? • Is this a real problem or something your brain is making up? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are bigger than your worries • You just have to do it and be brave

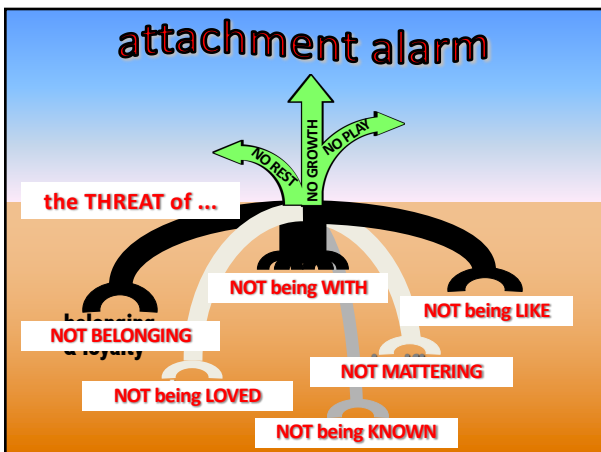
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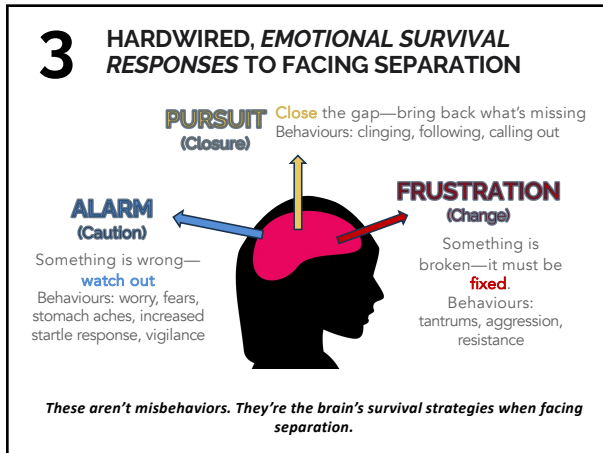
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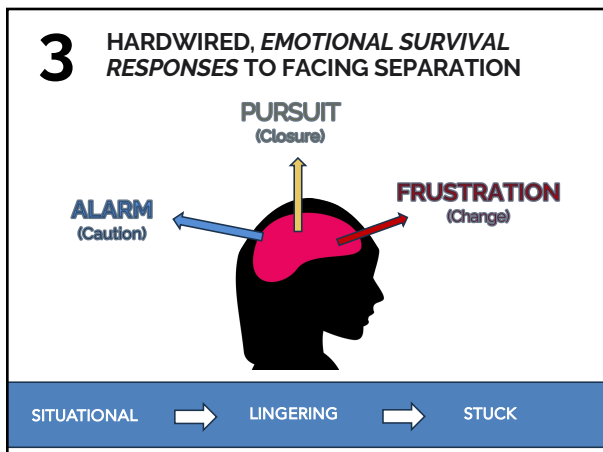
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WHY?

Are our kids more alarmed and anxious then?

Because they are facing more separation.



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SOURCES OF SEPARATION FOR KIDS

5 COMMON SOURCES

- **Physical or emotional separation from a caregiver**
—Absences, conflict, or emotional unavailability can trigger alarm
- **Separation-based discipline (timeouts, consequences)**
—Discipline that uses separation from what kids are attached to
- **Lack of belonging and connection**
—When not deeply rooted in adult relationships at home or school
- **Death or awareness bad things can happen to self or loved ones**
—Confronting loss or the possibility of it fuels separation and existential alarm
- **Life transitions (new sibling, move, divorce, daycare)**
—Changes and transitions are encounters with separation and can fuel uncertainty

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SOURCES OF SEPARATION FOR KIDS


5 HIDDEN SOURCES

- **Peer orientation (rely on peers over their adults)**
—When peers replace adults as their compass point, face more alarm from rejection and insecurity
- **Developmental shifts (early childhood to adolescence)**
—Natural growth spurs alarm as they face separation from identity, and caretakers
- **Dominance issues (power battles with adults to lead)**
—They don't depend on their adults to lead and guide them, try to take over and orchestrate connection, resistant
- **Sensitivity and neurodivergence (can feel "too much" to handle)**
—Sensory systems are more easily stirred up leading to emotional overload and intensified alarm
- **Success**
—Can foster alarm as increasing success adds weight to their performance and increases the potential loss or failure

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The question isn't just how to solve the problem of alarm...

It's how to guide our kids through it so they recover and become more resilient & confident.




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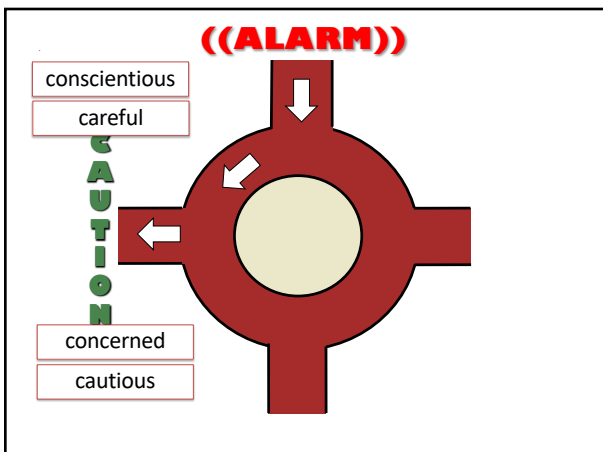
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Three natural ways we are meant to resolve alarm emotions

- CAUTION
- ADAPT
- COURAGE



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When do you see your kids move to caution?

- Leaving home and going to daycare, preschool or school
- Going to bed at night
- Avoiding a 'mean' friend
- Bully on the playground
- When a parent or teacher yells
- When faced with a sibling who is aggressive
- Emergency lock down at school
- Driving a car

Caution: Alarmed at the threat of separation from something or someone you are attached to

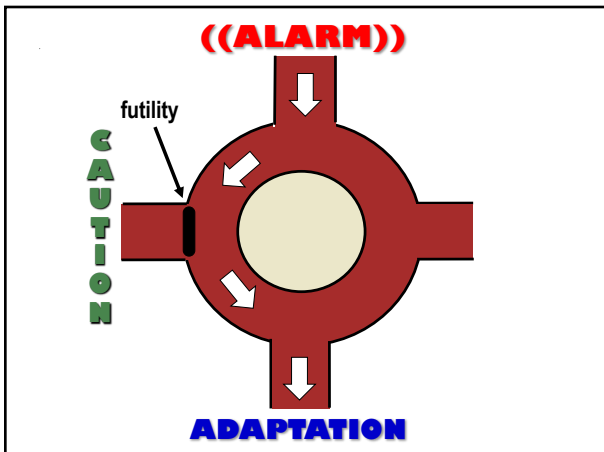
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Ways we use alarm to get our kids to behave

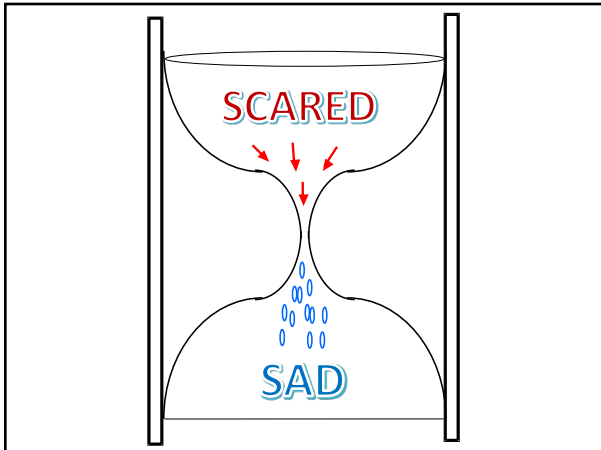
- Raising our voice
- Warnings & threats
- Ultimatums
- Feigning separation
- Trading on their fears
- Scary stories

SACRIFICIAL PLAY: We overwork the alarm system for the sake of compliance

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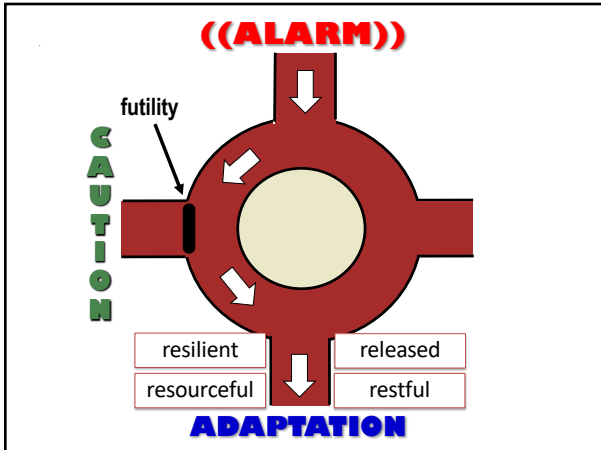
Some alarming futilities

- not being able to **hold on** or keep someone close
- not **mattering as much** as you would like, being wanted and chosen
- **not being truly seen** or understood
- the **loss of affection** or significance to another
- the **passage of time** and growing up (young kids & teens)
- **death and the realization that bad things** can happen to you or the people you love

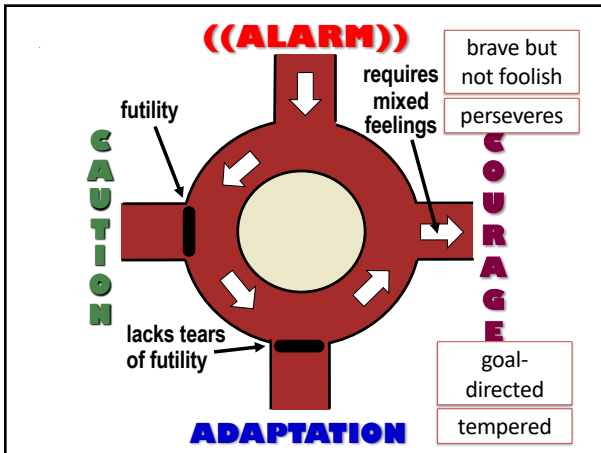
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Courage and Confidence

<p>DESIRE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to engage in an activity to take part in some fun to ask one's question to stand up for a friend to wear what one prefers to share one's story to express one's opinion to get attached & involved to pursue a passion to be oneself 		<p>ALARM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to be away from home to be laughed at to appear stupid to lose popularity to be seen as different to not be interesting to meet disapproval to have to let go to not measure up to be alone
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CULTIVATE COURAGE

LEWIN'S PRINCIPLE

When a scenario involves both alarm and desire, the nearer one is to it, the more alarming it appears; the further one is from it, the more desirable it seems.

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*When alarm gets stuck
(the vulnerability is too much to bear)*

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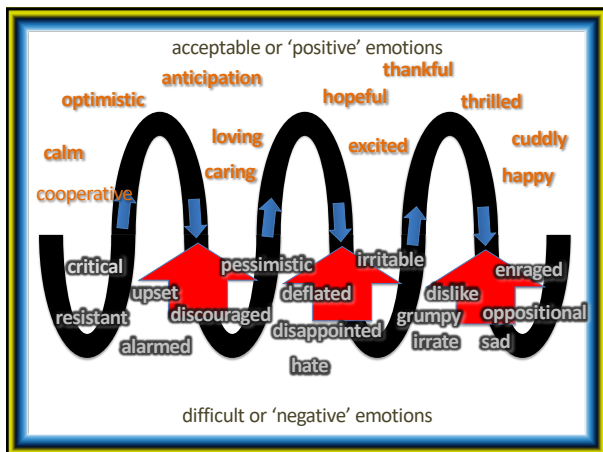


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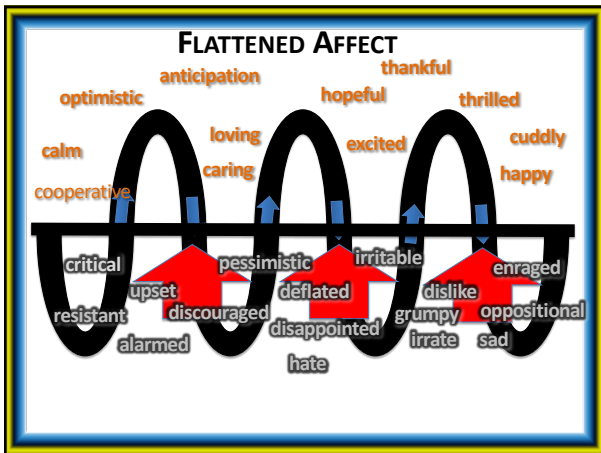
Why does the brain need to reduce vulnerability?

- ... Emotional expression has repercussion for relationships
- ... There is work to do that emotion could get in the way of
- ... There is a wounding environment one has to survive
- ... Sensory and emotional overload due to sensitivity
- ... There is a lack of invitation for expression

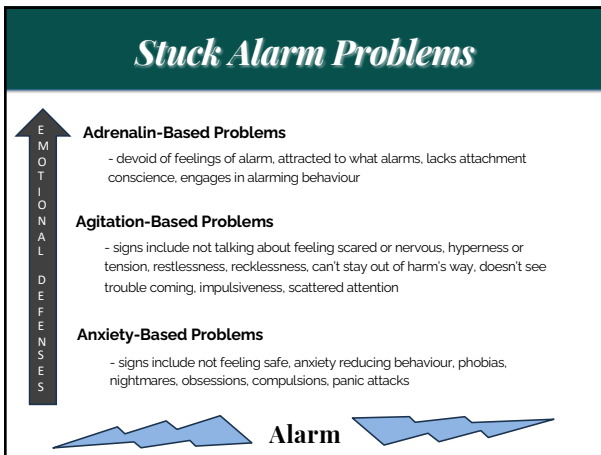
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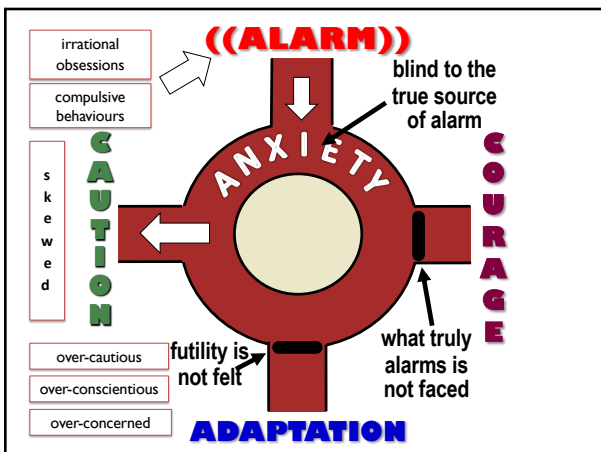
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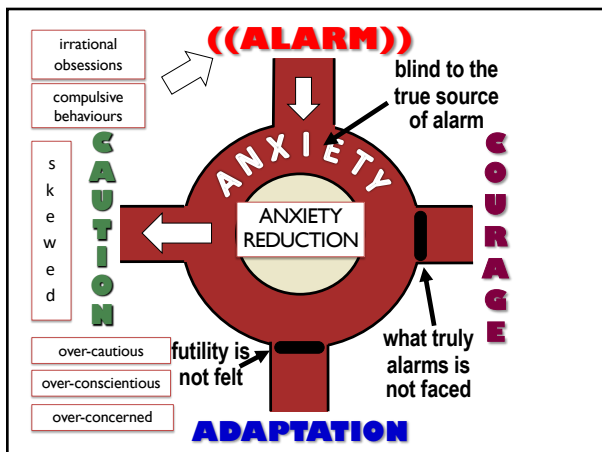
Irrational Obsessions (false idea of what is wrong)	Related Compulsions (to avoid alarm & reduce anxiety)
Someone or something is out to hurt me or to get me.	work at avoiding the monsters and scary creatures, avoid getting conned, uncover people's plots
Something is wrong with my health or my functioning or is going to make me sick.	work at keeping things clean , at not getting sick, at avoiding germs, at avoiding contamination
Something is out of order or out of place.	work at putting things in order and preserving order
Something is wrong with my body or with how I look.	work at improving one's appearance or at changing one's shape
Some places or situations are dangerous or unsafe.	work at avoiding the things and situations that make one feel unsafe
Something has been left undone .	work at remembering to complete one's tasks
I might not measure up .	work at getting things perfect , doing things right, improving oneself

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typical signs of elevated anxiety

- unrelenting sense that **something is wrong** or that something bad is going to happen
- persistent feelings of **nervousness or tension**, lack of safety
- dreams reflect the emotional theme of alarm (eg, **nightmares**)
- motor energy of alarm may find release through **nervous tics and muscle spasms**
- periodic waves of **unexplained panic**

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compulsive anxiety-reducing behaviours

- **oral activities** such as sucking, chewing, nail biting & eating
- **rhythmic activity and stimulation** (eg. rocking, pacing, music with a beat, swinging, flickering fire, watching waves, worry beads, stroking, twirling hair, rubbing genitals, masturbation)
- seeking comfort through **contact with transitional objects**
- **physical exertion**
- **drug taking** (e.g. nicotine, alcohol, marijuana and most prescription drugs)

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6 Strategies for reducing anxiety and feeling alarm



Anxiety is alarm that is not felt vulnerably
— **"alarm without eyes"**

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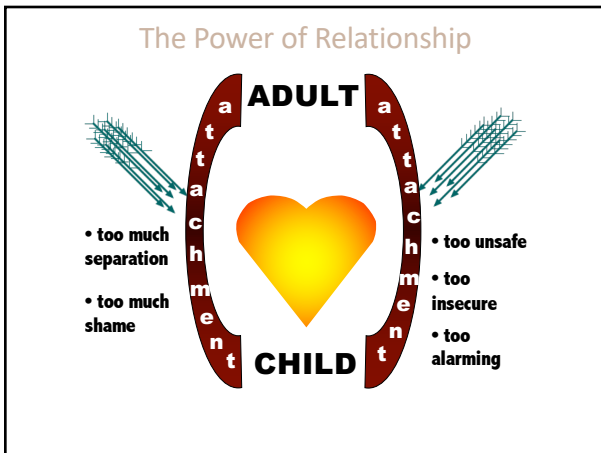


6 Strategies for Supporting Kids with Anxiety

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An adult must assume responsibility to care for a child and their feelings of alarm.

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Helping Kids in Troubled Times
 - applying relational and emotional first-aid -
 so that distressing events don't turn into trauma

Where the helper can be ANYONE but preferably a caring adult to whom the child or adult is attached or will attach

helper

PLAY

RELATIONSHIP

- parent
- grandparent
- relative
- teacher
- coach
- expert
- counsellor
- therapist
- caregiver
- case worker
- volunteer

- treating children and adults marked by stuck alarm
 Helping stuck (trauma) kids get unstuck

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6 Strategies for Supporting Kids with Anxiety

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Reduce any separation and bridge the divide between you.

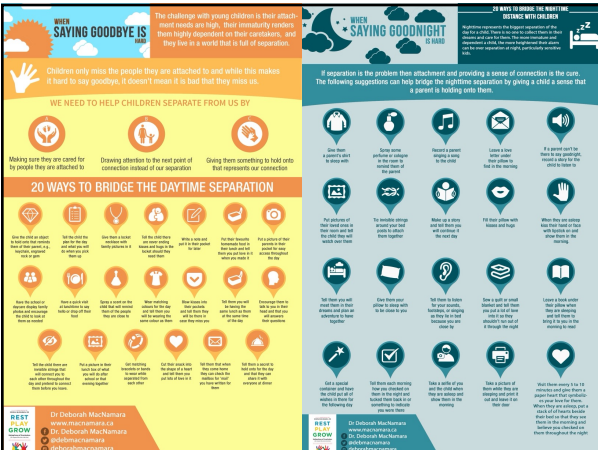
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Bridge what comes between you

Put the focus on the return, the things that stay the same, and give them **something to hold onto** that represents your connection

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WHEN SAYING GOODBYE IS HARD

The challenge with young children is their attachment needs are high. Their inability renders them highly dependent on their caregivers, and they live in a world that is full of separation.

Children only miss the people they are attached to and while this makes it hard to say goodbye, it doesn't mean it is bad that they miss us.

WE NEED TO HELP CHILDREN SEPARATE FROM US BY

- Making sure they are cared for by people they are attached to
- Drawing attention to the next point of connection instead of our separation
- Giving them something to hold onto that represents our connection

20 WAYS TO BRIDGE THE DAYTIME SEPARATION

IF SEPARATION IS THE PROBLEM THEN ATTACHMENT AND PROVIDING A SENSE OF CONNECTION IS THE CURE.

The following suggestions can help bridge the nighttime separation by giving a child a sense that a parent is holding onto them.

20 WAYS TO BRIDGE THE NIGHTTIME SEPARATION

1. Give them a comfort object to use when they are alone.

2. Empty their pockets and drawers to reduce the sense of being empty.

3. Record a parent reading a story to the child.

4. Leave a love note or letter to be read in the morning.

5. If a parent will be home in the morning, leave a message on the phone to be listened to.

6. The presence of a parent's voice is comforting.

7. The bedtime story is a great way to connect.

8. Make it a story that is about the child and the parent.

9. Fill the room with a familiar scent.

10. When they are alone, have a message on the phone to be listened to.

11. Tell them you will be home in the morning.

12. Tell them you love them and will be home in the morning.

13. Tell them you will be home in the morning.

14. Tell them you will be home in the morning.

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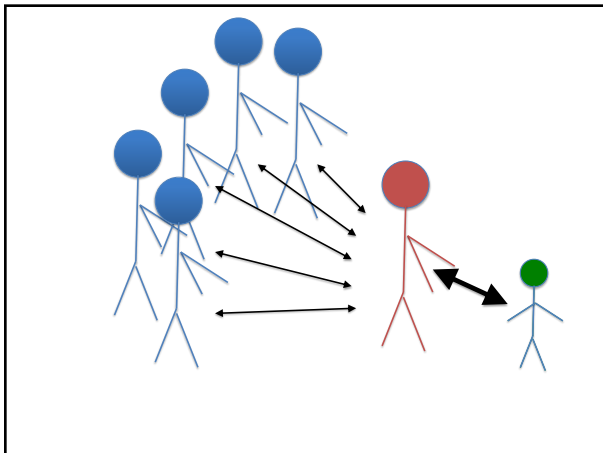
20. Tell them you will be home in the morning.

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Relationships that should be encouraged...

- relationships with **parents and family**
- relationships with other **care-givers** in the child's life: day-care providers, preschooler teachers, babysitters, family workers, nannies
- relationships with **socializing agents**: grandparents, uncles/aunts, teachers, mentors, roles, coaches
- **hierarchical relationships** between children
- relationships with peers that **do not compete** or conflict with those above

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WHEN SAYING GOODBYE IS HARD

Separation is hard for young kids because attachment is their most important need.

Introduce them to the adults in their 'attachment village' and foster strong bonds between them.

When connected to caretakers, the following three-step, goodbye routine can help ease them into separations that must be faced.

3 STEP DANCE

- 1 COLLECT AND LEAD**
 - Engage your child's attachment instincts by focusing on faces or what they are paying attention to, and respond with warmth. Lead them into the transition by focusing on your connection.
 - Play your way through the transition time and create some play rituals that can ease the alarm such as dancing, singing, or being different animals going on an adventure.
- 2 BRIDGE THE DIVIDE**
 - Focus on what steps the same between you such as we have the same lunch or some colour shirt today. Focus on the return and what will happen when you see each other again.
 - Give the child something to hold onto that represents your relationship such as a ticket, paper heart, picture of their family if they say they don't want you to go, acknowledge and come alongside feelings, and then bridge the divide again.
- 3 MATCHMAKE TO CARETAKER**
 - Put the focus on saying hello and being friendly to their caretaker.
 - Focus on scenarios between the child and caretaker, giving them an opportunity to capture your child's attention while you are present.
 - Leave your child when you see and feel they have connected with their caretaker. Focus on what you will see them next and assure them their caretaker will be there for them.

For more information read Chapter 8 in Rest, Play, Grow

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6 Strategies for Supporting Kids with Anxiety

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Come alongside emotions and make room for expression.

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*To come alongside a child's feelings is to **refrain from the opposite:***

- judging feelings
- discounting/negating/countering feelings
- defending oneself or another
- conveying that they are too much to handle
- teaching a lesson
- solving a problem

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To come alongside a child's feelings ...

- a) **accept their existence** regardless of how irrational and unreasonable they may seem
- b) **normalize the feelings** rather than treat their existence as a problem
- c) **make room for the feelings** rather than try to get rid of them

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6 Strategies for Supporting Kids with Anxiety

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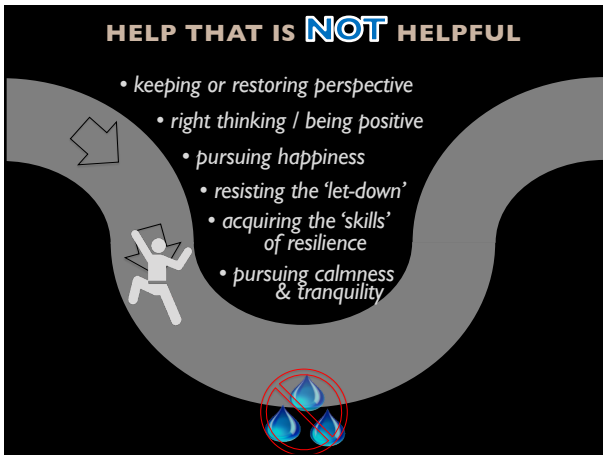
Support tears as the answer to dealing with the things that are unchangeable or alarming.

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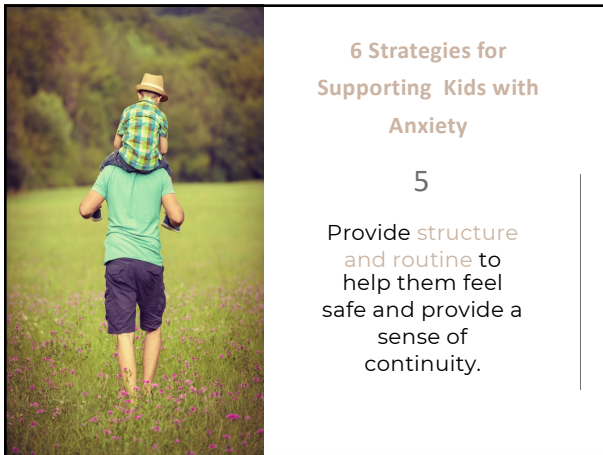
The emotional journey of resilience



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Playing with ALARM



- peek-a-boo play
- rescue play
- startle play
- safe hide-away play
- ambush games
- dare games
- 'tumble' play
- monsters & scary creature play
- safe-at-home play
- scary stories, games and activities

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Use **PLAY** to recover lost feelings of **SADNESS**



- through **puppets** and stories, to address impediments and show the way through
- through role play, **theatre & drama** where sadness is 'not for real'
- using **singing** to engage while drawing attention to charged material
- through **melancholy** music or sad stories
- through their **identification** and emulation of fictional characters to bring them closer to their tears
- in the wake of **intense and exhausting** expression of attacking impulses in play

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Grab the free guide:

SIX ATTACHMENT RITUALS:
Staying close through the years




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