

Accommodating Children's Anxiety Can Do More Harm Than Good

Insightful research on positive and negative parenting for childhood anxiety.

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THE BASICS

- [What Is Anxiety?](#)
- [Find a therapist who can help with anxiety.](#)

Parents face great challenges raising kids in our increasingly complex, frightening and uncertain world. The [CDC reports that anxiety is on the rise among children, affecting 7.1 percent of children 6 to 17 years of age, about 4.4 million U.S. kids. The majority are untreated.](#)

Children face myriad challenges—[bullying, developmental trauma, information overload, global political upheavals and conflict, climate change](#), high rates of family breakup, and so on. Failing to properly equip children to enter adulthood is likely contributing to high rates of anxiety and other issues among [Millennials and Gen-Zers](#). [Learning to ride out anxiety and negotiate firm-but-flexible boundaries is a language much harder to learn in adulthood.](#)

Parental Accommodation Is Avoidant

In the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, authors O'Connor, Holly, Chevalier, Pincus & Langer ([2020](#)) focus on "parental accommodation," defined as: "[T]he involvement of caregivers in facilitating child avoidance of anxiety-provoking stimuli or in alleviating the distress caused by anxiety." Parental accommodation includes behaviors such as "providing reassurance, allowing the child to skip activities when distressed, [modifying family routines, and adhering to *child-assigned* \[italics added\] rules around anxiety-provoking stimuli.](#)"

Accommodation increases anxiety because youngsters never have a chance to fail and persist. This can stunt [self-efficacy](#), preventing "[fear extinction](#)" and "habituation" to anxiety-provoking situations. It's a vicious cycle, increasing the chance of giving up too easily with future challenges, though innate [resilience](#),

related to child temperament, can mitigate the effects of problematic environmental factors.

Parents can be well-defended against seeing liabilities due to [narcissistic blind spots](#), [personal problems](#), and [related issues](#). Preliminary research identifies factors that may contribute to parental accommodation: [maternal anxiety](#), [maternal internalizing](#) ("bottling up" feelings rather than expressing them in healthy ways), [maternal stress](#), and parental [depression](#). However, the picture isn't clear.

O'Connor and colleagues designed a study to further investigate parental accommodation, with 64 children, their mothers, and 41 fathers. The parents' average age was mid 40s, children around age 11. Children's diagnoses included [generalized anxiety disorder](#), [specific phobias](#), [social anxiety](#), [PTSD](#), and [panic and agoraphobia](#). Participants were mainly White, most with income above \$100,000, 81 percent married.

Findings

Accommodation increased with child anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty. Parental accommodation was not related to parental distress or emotional dysregulation, counterintuitively. Higher child distress and emotional dysregulation, as measured by parents, was associated with increased parental accommodation. Parental accommodation was not correlated with child-reported distress and emotional dysregulation.

Perception was important for mothers. Mothers who reported that their children showed more severe symptoms were more likely to use accommodation, but maternal accommodation was unrelated to the mothers' own reported distress and emotional state.

It may be that mothers wish to spare their children anticipated distress, and that this desire is different from overall distress. Including measures of [empathy](#) and parental distress due specifically to child's distress could tease this apart in future studies.

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Likewise, maternal accommodation was correlated with child anxiety and externalizing behaviors (in which emotions are directed outward, typically in aggressive or destructive ways, rather than processed in healthy ways or bottled up).

Accommodation fixes problems short-term—for instance when a parent "gives in" to a child's tantrums to get them to stop screaming, or bribes a child to do something rather than building intrinsic motivation with a longer-term process of rewarding effort and building an inner sense of confidence.

Mothers had a stronger accommodation response than fathers, with overall child distress predicting 47 percent of their response, versus fathers, for whom it predicted 25 percent.

According to prior research, mothers of anxious children, but not fathers, have higher rates of anxiety and depression. Is it that fathers are less emotionally affected, and so can tolerate using strategies other than accommodation? On average, fathers are less involved in childcare. Less burnout makes it easier to stick with the rules.

Additional Considerations

This research appears on the surface consistent with stereotypes that mothers are more attuned to their children's distress than fathers, likely to be "permissive" but more "caring."

Fathers are often seen as detached, mean or uncaring, "too strict." When parents aren't on the same page, it leads to big problems. It's easy to fall into gender stereotypes, and both parents miss out.¹

[Parental consistency can help protect children from emotional problems.](#) Children can and do become caught in the middle between parents who aren't getting along. Such "triangulation" distracts children from addressing their own needs.

[Compassion buffers empathy,](#) allowing parents to tolerate their children's distress without getting overwhelmed, numbing out, or becoming enraged. Parents are encouraged to [engage their curiosity](#) when they feel the urge to accommodate or try to overpower children.

["Mindful parenting"](#) has been shown to be helpful to ground parents and allow them to see what is happening, and shift gears. Parents must deal with their own issues, and not play them out within the family. If they don't, the child often becomes the receptacle for all of the family's issues.

If parents don't address their issues, even if kids do well later in life, there are likely to be chronic problems in the parent-child relationship, affecting intimacy and satisfaction with the family of origin and potentially leading children repeat them in adult relationships.

Resources

Child Mind Institute, [How to Help Children with Anxiety](#)

Stanford University, [Resources for Parents of Children with Anxiety Disorders](#)

Anxiety Disorders Association of America, [Tips for Parents and Caregivers](#)

Ackerman Institute for Family and Couples, [Frequently Asked Questions](#)