

FOCUSING ON THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Presented by Dr Vivienne Mountain at Stories of Childhood 10 October 2020

UNDERSTAND ANXIETY

Anxiety is the disease of this time of danger and unpredictability. Change is happening fast, we have more and more sensory input and for most people it is hard to understand and cope with the changing demands. This is true for adults and children.

FEAR is a normal and powerful primitive response to danger. Fear is part of life in being a human and continues through life. From the moment of birth the baby responds with fear to the unpredictability in the environment. A loud noise or sudden movement will make a baby cry. It is a cry to the caregiver for help. The response of help and comfort from the caregiver helps the baby to trust and builds up an ability to cope with uncertainty and fear.



WORRY is usually related to an immediate stress, a reaction to a danger or threat to our sense of calm regulation. The child must know and understand the danger and then decide what to do.



ANXIETY is not easy to understand, it is a larger thinking habit that relates to many fears and worries in life all at once. It is an overwhelming future sense of uncertainty, like a stack of uncontrollable worries, none are easy and somehow they all crowd in on our life at once, it is like a lens through which all of life seems dangerous. There is the constant questioning- What if this happens? What if that happens? Panic attacks are an extreme form of anxiety needing some special pastoral / medical understanding and support.

RESPONDING TO ANXIETY

IDEAS FOR YOUR PLAYGROUP

Be real – life can be hard – but God is with us – we can do things to help Uncertainty is all around us – COVID 19 – family breakups – extreme weather – fires – floods – death in the family – death of animals – car accidents – violence.

Children need our special support and care Traumatic events come to us all, but for children with less life experience they can be a shock, a de-stabilising experience, where the world they know suddenly is not recognizable. Different children experience trauma differently. Some show greater resilience in temperament. However, we must watch out for those who become stuck in the frightening situation where trauma and anxiety can affect other aspects of life such as confidence and social connection.

Take Action Faith and works go together says St James. This is a challenge for our local church groups. As a collective the church can make a statement of faith through actions. Through our adult Church Council discussions, our use of money, intercessory prayer and our spiritual formation programs, we can encourage faith and hope. There is encouragement for children and families when they see the initiatives that are happening in the Church.

We can make a difference

I am only one – But still I am one – I cannot do everything – But I can do something – I will not neglect to do the something that I can do

IDEAS FOR PARENTS

Loving relationships are essential, we need adults to model a calm attitude of faith.

Face your own worries and anxiety, let's not pretend, we are human too.

Listen to your children – together identify problems – how do the problems show themselves? Maybe in the body with a sick feeling tummy, a headache, or trouble sleeping. Worries also show themselves in feelings of anger, sadness or always feeling tired.



Consider strategies – have a worry box, or a designated worry-time.

Use imagination – give the worries names, draw a picture of them, design different ways to keep them under control.

Use music – calm and regular rhythm will help to bring order to the atmosphere in the family.

Repetition brings a sense of order- children respond well to repetition in touch as in slow patting or stroking. Clapping games and skipping have a similar effect. Or there could be repetition of favourite stories or movies. This helps the brain to slow down and relax, enabling quiet clear thinking.

Good health – more exercise, healthy eating, drink water, set up routines of bedtime, exercise and conscious relaxation such as breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation.

Take care with visual exposure – horror movies, TV news coverage showing violence, dead animals and fire devastation should be monitored. It is not good for children to view frightening images alone.

Remember good memories – make a photo wall or an art wall to keep the good in focus.

Encourage a family mantra – something to learn together to keep thoughts in a positive focus, like a motto or poem.

For our family, learning Psalm 23 was important, helping us to remember that God walks with us in the times of 'deepest darkness' when we are afraid.

Encourage family changes – If the worry is about our environment discuss some new ways we could live, such as, save water, turn off lights, recycle, walk, change spending patterns.

As a family use mindfulness, meditation and prayer.

Remember professional help is available with counselling and psychology giving greater understanding through Narrative Therapy, Play Therapy, Compassion Therapy, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, etc. Medical interventions such as antidepressant medication is also possible.

We pray: 'Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' This is God's good earth. We are part of God's creation and we work with God to care and protect our children and our world.



RESPONDING TO ANXIETY

IDEAS FOR CHILDREN

Remember you are not alone

Imagine the five fingers on your hand. We need to identify five people who support and encourage us – these people are like our treasure. Try to find words for your worries or if that is too difficult draw a picture and share worry ideas with your special people.

Family, friends, teachers and ministers/pastors can help with good ideas. They can remember being young and scared too.

Jesus called God 'Dad'; he remembered that God keeps loving us when we are happy or frightened or sad or angry.

Get out in the fresh air, look out for good things in nature.

Play some games. Find a hobby.



ENCOURAGE TIME FOR FUN AND GRATITUDE IN FAMILIES

Fun and gratitude encourage our faith and hope

Spend time with others – phone calls, making presents, parties and celebrations



Spend time in nature, notice and wonder

Play games

Design some creative activities to do together

Notice beauty – make a Beauty Book or a Beauty PowerPoint – write some poems, use your own drawings and photographs or Google some others.

Make a Thank You Book or a Thank You Tree

Look for Bible stories of struggle and rejoicing, e.g., Miriam led the dancing, David and Goliath

Interview family members who are happy and smile, ask about their hard times – how did they do it? What good ideas can they share?

IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

Worry ... What do you worry about? What healthy approaches to anxiety can you model as playgroup leaders/ministry teams?

Listening ... How can you make space to hear the worries of children and adults? What creative and helpful responses could you provide in your playgroup/ministry?

Fun-faith-gratitude ... How does your family express these aspects of life? How does your playgroup/ministry model and encourage fun and gratitude?