

Counselor's Corner

Dear Parents,

Lately, I've been reading a lot about unusually high **anxiety** rates in children. I am also noticing unusually high numbers with the need to support young children struggling with **self-regulation**. Self-regulation skills help us all deal with disappointments. Not to be misinterpreted as true clinical anxiety, some anxious feelings are based on a fear that we will not succeed in our goal or get what we want. We must experience the art of dealing with tough situations and having a strong ability to be flexible enough without breaking windows. <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=OF8MrPpn4oE>

Nearly a third of adolescents have had an anxiety disorder, and more than 8 percent of them experience severe impairment, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Anxious kids often grow into anxiety-stricken adults, with better than 19 percent of U.S. adults suffering from anxiety disorder in a given year.

In an article by Christine Ravesi-Weinstein M.Ed. on things to say to students suffering from anxiety, she offers ways to open a discussion with children. It leads me to believe that our students are dealing with constant worry of a forthcoming failure or being disappointed when things do not go their way. This worry also becomes magnified when one faces something new without having the tools to think through all possible alternatives, sort of a mental rehearsal.

From one of our anti-bullying lessons called IF/THEN, students were taught, **"If I do this, then this might happen. I can handle that. But if I do this, then this may happen. What will I do then? Let me think this through."**

In a related story by Rita Giordano (March 13, 2019), the author believes at a time when childhood and adolescent anxiety has reached epidemic proportions, Yale researchers have come up with a novel way to help nervous youngsters: Treat their parents.

Based on a program called SPACE, or Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions, parents help their children with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques, learning to identify anxious thoughts, challenge them, and practice facing their fears. In this program developed at the Yale Child Study Center, grown-ups are being taught to help their kids manage anxiety by reducing – lovingly and supportively – the accommodations the adults make for their children's symptoms.

What are accommodations? They run the gamut: allowing an anxious child to stay home from school, sleeping nightly with a frightened child, responding to numerous calls or texts every day from a nervous tween, not having houseguests because of a youngster's social anxiety. An estimated 98 percent of parents with anxious kids engage in these kinds of behaviors.

Now I'll get to my point. **Is there a connection to this alarming data and parents not letting children fail?** The earlier children experience disappointment and live through it unscathed, the more easily they will be able to handle not making a select basketball team or not getting to choose what to eat for dinner or, brace yourselves, not getting into USC.

I imagine there is a study linking the practice of not allowing kids experience disappointment to the increase we see with child anxiety, but I prefer the obvious. Having had the benefit of seeing changes in education over 50 years, by far, **I believe it is so damaging to not let kids fail.** Not every team gets a trophy. Not every student gets a sticker for doing what is their job to do. The true rewards come from knowing we can get through the day in spite of unforeseen challenges. Now, that's worth a sticker.

When I ask students what "reward" they truly want for completing their project on time, it eventually is not a new game or a new watch. When parents appear to be even somewhat unavailable to their children with, I'll just see who that text is from, rather than, I'll get to it later, it creates some degree of anxiety. How many times each night do kids experience this? "What if I need Mom and she is not available?" Our children need to feel they are number one. They want to be more important than a text, an email, a phone call. I'll just leave you with this story.

"Billy was always so proud of his dad. Night after night, Billy watched as his dad spent hours on his computer. "I've just got to finish this report, Billy. I'll get to you in a minute." Or "I'll be finished with these emails soon, son, then we can do something." The message is that work was so very important, that it even invaded his home time.

After many months, Billy asked his father an interesting question. "How much do you make in an hour, Dad?"

His father responded with, I make about \$50 an hour."

Billy then asked a more important question. "Dad, can I borrow \$20?"

"Why?" answered Dad.

"Well," began Billy. "I already have \$30 saved up. I would like to buy an hour of your time."