

## Positive Discipline for Anxious (and non-anxious children)

By their very nature, anxious kids tend to be sensitive and perfectionistic. They want to be the best they can be and they want you to be happy with them. Because of this, discipline for anxious kids comes with its own challenges. Done positively though, it can build your anxious (or non-anxious) child and cement your relationship. Here's how to make sure of that:

### 1. Discipline, not punishment.

Discipline. As in 'disciple'. As in, 'to teach'. Kids are going to get it wrong. So will we. Hope so, because it's how we learn. We're looking for long term results. The more they take on the lessons when they're little, the easier the run you'll have when they're adolescents.

Discipline is different to punishment. It's more important, more productive and focuses on teaching a lesson rather than modifying a behaviour. Punishment will teach a behaviour because of fear of consequences, discipline will teach a behaviour because that behaviour comes to makes sense.

That doesn't mean there won't be consequences – all of our choices have consequences and that's an important lesson, but with positive discipline, the consequences make sense: 'When you lie to me it damages my trust. I know we can get it back because I know that's not the person you want to be, but until we have that trust back between us I don't want you going anywhere after school. I need to know that you're safe and that I can trust you to be where you say you're going to be and at the moment I can't,' ... which is very different to, 'You lied to me so you're grounded.'

Kids will see the world a little differently to grown-ups – how can they not. Teach them about your world with love and respect. Like any teaching, it will take time to learn the lesson – but they will learn it and when they do, they'll own it. Taking on a behaviour because that behaviour makes sense is vastly different to taking on a behaviour in order to avoid the consequences. One leads them, one forces them. Which way would you be most responsive to?

### 2. Let the value be the driver.

Focus on the value to be taught, rather than the 'wrongness of the behaviour. Respect? Kindness? Integrity? Honesty? Whatever it is, let this shape your response.

For every rule, be clear about the value behind it. Have the conversation and let them know why it's important.

For example, if you've just found out that you've been lied to about homework, work out the value this violates. The biggest problem isn't the homework, but the lie – it violates the value of respect, honesty and it violates trust. Explain this and explain why the lie is worse than the behavior it's covering. When you have them on board with the values, they'll write the rules themselves.

### 3. Relationship. Relationship. Relationship.

Okay, maybe not so eloquent when you say it three times, but the point is that the better your relationship with your child, the more effective your discipline will be. They want to make you happy, even if it doesn't always work out that way. Preserve the relationship by focusing on their behaviour, not on them.

This is important for all kids, especially anxious ones. Anxious kids tend to be perfectionistic and they need to know that even if you're not keen on their behavior, you still think they're amazing and that you love them no matter what. They'll be quick to see their wrongdoing and you'll want to minimise the potential for shame. They'll be ready to feel it because they often hold themselves to such high standards. A little bit of shame is fine – it's the thing that measures behaviour and keeps us on track, but too much will fall them.

Anxious kids will be very quick to interpret a stern word from you as evidence that they aren't good enough. Reassure them. Hold them or touch them while you talk to them about their misbehaviour.

#### 4. Don't even try to be 'perfect'. It's bad for them and it's bad for you.

Let them know when you get it wrong so they can see that it's not the end of the world and that everyone gets it wrong sometimes. When you do make a mistake – whether it's getting them to school late, saying the wrong thing, taking a wrong turn or taking out your bad mood on them – let them see you acknowledge the mistake and be kind to yourself in response. 'Oh no. I've taken a wrong turn. Not to worry – we can sort this out easy peasy,' or, 'I've been a bit grumpy today and I'm sorry if I feel like I've been grumpy at you. I'm not. You're wonderful. I'm just a bit tired so tonight I'm going to have a good sleep so I don't feel cranky tomorrow.'

Modelling your imperfections and your acceptance of those imperfections will help your child to feel less pressure to be perfect. You might yell when you shouldn't, say the wrong thing, land a slap-together dinner on the table at 9pm or forget to pick them up the day school ends early (once ... it was once!). There will be times you stuff up monumentally on the parent front. It's going to happen. Which is good, great actually, because there's your opportunity to teach them a lesson that will build them for life: Everybody gets it wrong sometimes and that's okay – it's how we learn to do it better next time.

#### 5. Separate emotions from behavior.

Validate the feeling. Reject the behaviour. Kids feel what they feel because they feel it. It's just that simple. What they're feeling might not make sense to you, but to them, it makes perfect sense. The emotion is valid. The way they're expressing it might not be. Kids are no different to us – they need to feel heard. If they don't, nothing you say will go in because they'll be too busy trying to figure out how to make you 'get it'.

Empathise with the feeling, reject the behavior. 'I know you're upset that she knocked down your building – I really get that – but you can't throw things at her.' Make them accountable for their behavior, but let them know that you understand how they're feeling. Kids start to learn empathy from 14 months and they'll do this by watching you.

It's an important lesson for them moving forward that just because they feel something, doesn't always mean that the right thing to do is to act on it. At the heart of emotional intelligence is being able to identify and respond appropriately to emotions in the self and others.

#### 6. Deal with emotion first.

As with any of us, times of high emotion are not the time for wisdom, lectures, explanations or problem-solving. Don't try to make your point then – it's just not going to happen and it will make things worse. During high emotion, the part of the brain that can hear rationality or logic is 'offline', so they physically

don't have the capacity to receive or engage in a rational conversation. It's the way it is for all of us.

Instead, they need to know you that you're there, that you see them, and that you get it (their distress). That doesn't mean you agree with them, or that you're supporting the way they are behaving, but that you can support them when they're fragile. Think of it as being the scaffold between their high emotion, and the calm you want them to reach. To do this, acknowledge the emotion, 'I know you're angry/sad/confused' right now,' then wait until things settle down. Let them feel you as a strong, steady presence. When kids are out of control, they are quite literally, 'out of control of their brains'. They aren't doing it to be naughty or manipulative. They're doing it because there is something that they need they aren't getting. It's likely they don't even know what that is – they just know there's something. It might be attention, security, comfort, a sleep – whatever it is it will be valid, even if their way of going about it is a long way off 'adorable'.

If the calm doesn't come, let them have space to settle down, but let them know that you're there when they're ready. This isn't time out in the traditional sense where kids are separated, but more like space to calm down. Let them see you and let them know you're there. It's not a punishment – it's space to settle. When they've settled, give them a cuddle and then talk about the issue. By then, they'll be more ready to hear you. If there needs to be a consequence, let it be for what they did while they were upset (such as hurting someone or breaking something), not *that* they were upset. Let them know all feelings are okay, but not all behaviours are.

#### 7. Don't get emotional. (Or should I say, don't let on that you're emotional.)

When you're setting or protecting a boundary, communicate your message as matter-of-factly as you can. This can take the strength of a gladiator to pull off but it's important. Stay with the message and don't bring in irrelevant details, ('Grandma would be very disappointed'), old details, ('Yesterday you painted your sister and today you're putting her for-special dress on the dog – what's going on with you?'). Don't lecture, rant, or threaten to cancel Christmas (unless you actually are going to cancel Christmas – but that might be overkill for a for-special dress that now smells like dog.)

#### 8. Don't jolt them out of the fun stuff.

Give a warning that the end of an activity, or the beginning of another is coming. 'Another 5 minutes and then it's time to pack up,' or, 'bedtime in 10'. You get the idea.

#### 9. Have a routine – for everything.

They might not always thank you for it – and you might not always thank yourself – but routines provide security and predictability, and that's a little bit of wonderful for everyone. There'll be plenty of times you'll feel like straying away from the routine (or is that just me?), but it's so important and will make their world safe and structured. If there's turmoil going on inside of them, at least they know what to expect in the world outside of themselves.

#### 10. Your priorities will become theirs. Set them wisely.

Nothing matters more to your kids than you do. They want to keep you happy so they'll shape their behaviour around your responses. If you make more of a big deal of messy rooms than you do about them being brave, they will inevitably move towards tidiness being the most important value. Of course,

tidiness is an important one but there are others that are more so. We can't do everything. Neither can they. Some things you just need to let go of. This will give them permission to let go of having to be perfect too. There will be plenty of things that deserve high emotion – doing well at school, being kind, being helpful, being brave – save your high emotion for that and let the smaller things go. Spilling food on the floor never did anyone any harm.

### 11. Choices.

Allow for choices within your routine. Give your kids the opportunity to have some control within the safety of the boundaries you've set. 'Do you want to get dressed first or have breakfast first?' Make sure there's enough fun happening though – you don't want life to become one chore after another – story with bedtime, cuddle and a chat before breakfast, tv after a bath – whatever works for you.

### 12. Be consistent.

Few things will stoke anxiety more in an anxious child than unpredictability. One of the ways anxious people relieve their anxiety is through control. This isn't done to be insensitive or 'bossy', even though it might come out that way. It's done because of their great and very understandable need for predictability and safety.

The truth is that anxious kids don't need to control everything in order to feel safe but they do need someone to take the lead and you're perfect for the job. They need to understand that they can trust you to be in control of their lives. To show them, be predictable and clear with boundaries and have confidence in protecting those boundaries. Predictability will increase their sense of safety and will help to minimise the likelihood of an anxious response.

Without limits kids have nothing to guide their behaviour. The options become vast and overwhelming. They need to feel like you've got them, that you've set a safety zone and that within that, they're fine. Of course they'll push up against the edges and sometimes they'll move well outside them – that's all part of growing up and stretching their wings but even then, the boundaries will offer some sort of guide. In time, children without limits will become controlling and demanding – and that just doesn't end well for anyone.

### 13. And your expectations?

It's likely that your anxious child already expects a lot of themselves. Be alive to the possibility that you may be expecting too much or too little. If you overestimate their abilities you'll add to their stress. They'll want to make you happy and they'll push themselves to get there. Underestimate their capacity and you'll undermine their confidence. If you believe they can, it will make it easier for them to believe they can. Make sure your expectations are age appropriate and be careful that your own anxiety doesn't weigh in. (And I know that's easier said than done!)

You're only human. Thank heavens. Because living with perfection is no fun for anyone. Perfect people don't make great humans. It's hard to be with someone who knows everything and has nothing left to learn. (Or someone who thinks they are, anyway.) Be grateful for the mistakes you make along the way. The world doesn't want anything but real humans who make real mistakes raising our next generation of world shakers.