

# Parents of anxious children can avoid the 'protection trap'

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New research shows that some parental reactions may actually reinforce their children's feelings of anxiety. Credit: Courtesy of Lindsay Holly

Parents naturally comfort their children when they are scared, but new research shows that some reactions may actually reinforce their children's feelings of anxiety.

A new Arizona State University study shows that [parents](#) whose children suffer from anxiety often fall into the "protection trap" that may

influence their [child](#)'s behavior. The paper, "Variations in the Influence of Parental Socialization of Anxiety among Clinic Referred Children," was published in the journal, "*Child Psychiatry and Human Development*," by ASU graduate student Lindsay Holly, who is earning her doctoral degree in clinical psychology, and Armando A. Pina, ASU associate professor in child developmental psychology. Researchers analyzed self-report questionnaires and clinical interviews that were completed by 70 children aged 6 to 16 who were being treated for anxiety at a university-based program.

"Anxiety in [kids](#) is one of the most common disorders in childhood. A certain amount of anxiety is normal and necessary to stay safe. It's when the problematic levels of anxiety crop up when you can't go to school or hang out with friends that it becomes a major problem," Holly said. "That's when we can really look at what parents are doing and guide them in having a big impact on helping their kids cope with fears."

Parents may fall into the protection trap with scared children that is helpful in the moment, but reinforces their long-term feelings when the kids realize that they receive positive attention from the behavior. The study examined behaviors that may enable anxiety through reinforcement, punishment and modeling.

"The protection trap can be confusing for parents to understand," Holly said.

For instance, [anxious children](#) often ask for reassurance far more than other children, yet reassurance in the face of anxiety and fear sometimes gives the message that there is something dangerous in the environment to worry about, thus promoting avoidance of every situation that is perceived to be scary, she said.

Another aspect of the protection trap identified through the study

involves parents who allow their kids to avoid situations that are scary or uncomfortable. Excuses may be made in order to avoid scary things or situations and that can increase anxiety.

"The more a child avoids a situation that may be scary, the scarier it becomes because they don't have a chance to overcome it. They aren't given the chance to develop the coping skills or strategies to deal with the situation appropriately," she said.

Sometimes parents swoop in to take control when a child starts to show signs of anxiety or fear. Parents may tell the child what to do, how to behave and what to say during situations when the child is anxious. Or, they might do things on behalf of their child.

"They do the scary thing for them. The children don't overcome the situation and they keep feeling anxious," Holly said.

Children who may be fearful of avoiding situations such as going to a birthday party because they are anxious about it aren't necessarily helped by parents who RSVP their regrets for the child.

"Kids who deal with the natural consequences of RSVPing on their own would experience some of the negative consequences, leading to decreased anxiety in the future since they had dealt with the situation themselves," she added.

Parents can monitor how their own reaction to their child's anxiety affects their kids, thinking about the best way to respond and giving their children positive attention when they do something brave or face their fears in scary situations. It's also important to minimize the positive attention given to [anxiety](#), though it's hard for parents to see their kids in distress, Holly said.

"Even anxious [children](#) naturally face fears and situations that are frightening to them. Parents can look out for this type of bravery, no matter how small, and reward their child. Attention is often the most powerful type of reward so doing easy things like giving a high five, a smile, or a simple 'I like how you faced your fears!' can go a long way," Holly said.

"Being supportive and helping kids face their fears is really the key," she said.

Provided by Arizona State University

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