

ParentZone Pods - Episode 2: Dealing with anxiety

[0:09] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Welcome to ParentZone Pods at Anglicare Victoria, we've been working with parents to support their experience for over 20 years. Parenting is the toughest and most important job you'll ever have. Hi, I'm Laurie and with me is Anita.

[0:24] Anita Weber

Hi Laurie!

[0:24] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

And we are Parent Group facilitators at ParentZone. We're recording at the Pakenahm parents own hub. And today we've got lots of birds outside so you might hear them through the episode. This podcast reflects our work with parents and the many conversations we've had over the years.

ParentZone acknowledge and pay our respect to the traditional custodians of this land we are recording on today. Both the Wurunjuri and the Bunwoorong people of the Kulin nations. We also pay our respects to elder's past, present, and future.

In this episode, we're going to be talking about anxiety and how we help our children manage and understand their fears and worries, or discuss where their anxiety is a bad thing. And how as parents, we can tune into their anxiety and what we can do to really help our children manage these anxious feelings. So Anita being a parent of two quite anxious children myself, I do struggle a lot with this and how to understand them and what to do to help them.

[1:26] Anita Weber

Yeah anxiety is one of our most popular parenting topics. And usually parents are actually asking how do I stop my child from being afraid? How do I stop them, and get them to where they need to go off to school or bed usually, you know, they, school refusal or coming out and not going to bed on time. But it demonstrates that parents actually feel really uncomfortable with anxiety and uncomfortable with the feelings expressed by their children. And sometimes they just struggled to understand those fears, and just want help.

[1:56] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Yeah, and I think for me, it's also a case of wanting to shut down that anxiety, because I'm not wanting them to feel that anxiety. So I try and shut it down. But I'm wondering, is anxiety a bad thing?

[2:08] Anita Weber

Well, no. Anxiety is really normal, relatively predictable. And children experience it in different ways. But there's actually a general guide as children experience fears, at different ages and stages of development.

[2:21] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

And what are those common fears?

[2:23] Anita Weber

Well, toddlers might feel loud noises, strangers or being separated from the parents. Preschoolers, they start to develop their imagination, so it's imaginary creatures, such as ghosts and monsters with a generalized expression of fear of the dark.

[2:38] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Yeah, and interesting, you should say that because my daughter comes out most nights I will put her to bed and she will come out constantly throughout the night.

[2:45] Anita Weber

It's a bit of the chicken or the egg. Is the difficulty sleeping causing the anxiety? Or is the anxiety causing the difficulty sleeping? But it's a really big problem. School aged children's fees are more realistic and include illness death, failing, they're developing their intelligence. So they're developing those experiences as well. So the experience of anxiety is more realistic.

[3:06] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

And what about the teen years? My daughter's about to become a teen, what have I got in store for me?

[3:10] Anita Weber

Yeah, teens start to experience more social anxiety, fear of being bullied or being excluded socially, as well as that growing awareness of world issues and the impacts of things like climate change, and, you know, may join rallies and start to actually demonstrate that in more healthier ways.

[3:29] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Yeah. And it's interesting, you said about the fear of failing because I know that's a huge one for my children. It's almost like a perfectionism that they just don't want to fail and anything that they do, which causes them a lot of anxiety. Is that quite a common scenario?

[3:43] Anita Weber

Yeah, perfectionism is a sign of one of those strategies for anxious people in that they're actually avoiding failing as an attempt to avoid failure. And quite often, you know, they might revisit the work, they'll spend more time doing it, trying to get it perfect so that they don't fail. One of the things we often forget to talk about is the behaviors as well as what they're thinking but children may come to us seeking lots of reassurance they might be having temper tantrums, they might be lashing out at their brothers and sisters. But most of all, I think that is that negative thinking or catastrophizing, the situation that they facing, their interpretation of the events is quite wrong. They look for the dangers rather than the benefits.

[4:25] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

And can you give me an example of that?

[4:26] Anita Weber

Well, something like maybe Mum's coming home late from work, one child might be thinking, well Mum's been in an accident and getting really anxious and get really worried and, and really afraid, extremely afraid of what's happening to Mum. Whereas another child might be thinking, well, Mum stopped off at the supermarket on the way home I wonder if she's going to bring me a treat, and there'll be really excited about Mum not being home on time. It's that same event, and it's unknown. Neither child knows what Mum's doing, but their interpretation or their self talk is actually leading to very different emotional outcomes and feelings.

[5:04] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Right. Okay, so how do we help our children with that catastrophising?

[5:09] Anita Weber

We sit down with them, and we talk to them about those fears. And when we try to get them to think more realistically, we might ask them curiosity questions such as, is that really gonna happen? Or what happened last time? Bring their thinking back to reality and what the probability of something happening or occurring actually is.

[5:28] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

I like that. So what's more likely to happen versus what they're actually thinking?

[5:32] Anita Weber

Yeah. How often has Mum being like home from home from work? And what has actually occurred at those those times? Has she just been stuck in traffic? You know, what other things or what evidence is there, that she's been in an accident?

[5:46] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Makes total sense to me. So what you're saying then, in terms of anxiety is a combination of sort of the temperament of the child? Is that right? And then versus how the parent responds to that?

[5:57] Anita Weber

Yeah. A lot of parents, and we all tend to do that, because anxiety makes us feel uncomfortable dealing with their child's fees makes us feel uncomfortable, we might actually just say, Well, look, no, there's nothing to be afraid of go to bed. Or we might get angry and frustrated. Because you know, this happens night after night after night. And we just don't have a solution. But I think you know, if we actually teach our children how to manage that feeling, like all feelings, anxiety comes and goes, we can sit and feel we can talk to our child about what it feels like in their body, we can talk to our child about what strategies we can employ to reduce that feeling in our body. And we can ask them what their solution is, what do they see as something different? So your daughter who is struggling to separate at night - What's her solution to the problem?

[6:46] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Yeah, well, exactly. And I'm thinking that because she will often come out at nighttime and constantly come out throughout the night, and I usually just put it back to bed. But I'm thinking there must be something deeper going on for her that's causing this. So yes, I'm going to start asking her these curiosity questions that you're talking about. And really getting to the point like, what is it that's making you worried? Is it that you haven't spent enough time with me today? Or is there something deeper?

[7:10] Anita Weber

And look, even if it works, even if that first option works, that you've sent her back to bed, and she's fallen asleep. The fear hasn't gone away. It's still there. And it'll still present itself the next night. You haven't successfully gotten rid of it.

[7:23] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Yes. And well, I like what you said about how anxiety does pass. And it's not something that stays forever. And I think that's really important, because often we label our children as anxious children, but they're just having an anxious moment moment, aren't they? Yep, definitely. So how was parents? Can we tune into the anxiety and our children? What are the signs and symptoms we need to look for?

[7:46] Anita Weber

Every child's experience is different, I'm sure as parents we're the experts in regards to our child's behavior. So I'll throw that back to you. What is the evidence? What are the signs that you see in your anxious daughters?

[7:56] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Yeah, good question. So with my little nine year old, I think the biggest sign for her would be a sore stomach. So often, she will complain of pains in her tummy. She's not unwell or anything like that. So it's clearly coming from a place of she's worried about something.

[8:11] Anita Weber

Yeah, really common as well, as you know, headaches, trouble relaxing, sleeping, or breathing difficulties. They might even hyperventilate, if they're really afraid.

[8:20] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Yes. Yep. Another common one I see with my children. Yeah. And what can we do as parents and for our listeners to help our children manage these anxious feelings?

[8:28] Anita Weber

First of all, we need to actually just sit down, relax, and talk to our children about that, help them relax, and talk to their children about their fears. We need to find out from their perspective, what they're afraid of, you know, we might be assuming that it's a fear of being separated from us at bedtime, but it may actually be a fear of the dark. We actually need to speak to our children about those fears. And that's a very difficult thing for parents to do to actually sit with those feelings that make us so uncomfortable.

[8:58] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

It isn't it? And it's like peeling back the onion a little bit like getting to the core problem.

[9:02] Anita Weber

Yeah, yeah. Instead of thinking, well, if I ask them about this, are they going to be remembering it and their behavior is going to get worse? Am I attempting fate by opening up that conversation. And I don't believe you we are I think we actually kind of work out and problem solve with our children, how to get over those particular fears.

[9:21] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Because as you said before, it's not something we want to avoid. It's a genuine emotion. It's just that it's how we express and what we do with it.

[9:28] Anita Weber

Exactly. Right. Yep.

[9:30] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

So we've talked a lot about those developmental fears that our children can have, but what if it's more than that?

[9:36] Anita Weber

So we have talked about those generalized anxieties and childhood fears that relate to development. But if you feel like your child has got extreme anxieties, and that is actually interfering with their normal life, we'd recommend that you'd speak to your GP or seek some supports from parent line, reach out or headspace.

[9:58] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

So I know we've touched on some strategies about how we can help our children when they are having these anxious feelings. Have you got any other strategies to suggest?

[10:07] Anita Weber

Look, reassurance is probably the most used parental response. And that's great if it works. And it does work to some extent, but sometimes we find that we over assure, and if our kids are relying on our reassurance to actually do things, then we're actually need to find something better. And we might want to empower our children. For instance, if they're afraid of the dark, and afraid of monsters, for instance, if we empower them to give them control of the light, because quite often, a lot of us might let them go to sleep with a light on, then we'll turn it off when they're asleep. But if they wake up in the middle of the

night, and we've gone to bed, the first thing they're going to do is come straight to us. And that's the behavior that we don't want to see. So if we empower them, give them a torch and talk to them about using that and how to shine lights on corners of the room that might be scaring them, then they're in control of that fear, then they know that they've got something that they can actually do. And it's also a clue for them to use their own strategies, rather than than relying on us. Sometimes to as parents, we help them avoid the situation that creates the anxiety because we don't want to deal with the behaviors.

[11:17] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

I'm guilty of that, yes.

[11:20] Anita Weber

Sometimes, but what we should be doing is talking through them, showing them the strategies or teaching them strategies to help them calm themselves down. And as I said earlier, you know that more realistic thinking, you know, what's the worst thing that's going to happen? And is that so intolerable?

[11:37] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

Yes. So would you be able to help me with my daughter then? So I don't, she doesn't like sports. She's terrified of the ball, so she won't do, so usually, I pull her out. So I'm not empowering her. How do you think I could go about doing that?

[11:50] Anita Weber

Well, I'd talk to the school about the kind of rolls that she might be able to do in that maybe she can look after the equipment, maybe she can be engaged in a different way if she's too afraid to join the court. Baby steps, teaching her little bits of tolerance before she's able to cope with that. And that's how we build resilience. You know, it's that sense that we can do something that we can actually achieve things on our own. And that knowledge and with those experiences, our confidence grows.

[12:17] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith

So in this episode, we've discussed childhood anxiety and what it looks like in our children. We've talked about whether it's a bad thing, and how as parents, we can tune into that anxiety and really help them get through it. If you feel this is hitting home for you, and you'd like to have more information about the groups that we run at ParentZone, Google Anglicare ParentZone. For more information, or check the show notes where you are listening now.