

7 Keys to disciplining your anxious child

Some parents of anxious children have become anxious about disciplining their child because they have been told being 'harsh' induces anxiety in children. Here are a few keys to help you as a parent address this sensitive matter.

1. **Set clear rules and expectations.** Give your child a vivid description and experience of what your expectations and standards are. You may role-play out your rules and procedures. When communicating your rules talk about the underpinning values so that they understand why the rule exists and the importance of respecting it. For example, we don't have cell-phones at the dinner table because spending time focusing on family relationships is important. And, discuss the process of communications – how warnings and consequences will be given and implemented. Knowledge is security for your anxious child.
2. **Consistency is key.** Inconsistency is anxiety provoking for any young child. Set up regular routines – a predictable pattern of when, where, and how things are done. Predictability increases their sense of safety.
3. **Be a good role model of stress & emotional management.** This is self-explanatory but worth mentioning. If you remain calm and are disciplined in your approach to life and problems your child will model your behavior in his life. The best way for your child to learn discipline is by experiencing at home.
4. **Communicate unconditional love.** "Make sure he knows that although you want and expect him to do better next time, you love him no matter what" (Foxman, p.99). This is significant for your child as they are prone to having perfectionistic standards and judging themselves worthy based on their ability to please others. They are likely to view a single incident of displeasure from you as a global rejection of themselves. Your anxious child often needs frequent assurance of your unconditional love and acceptance of them. One suggestion to support this is the occasional offering of grace. That is, every once in a while, surprise them by pardoning their act of indiscretion – no preaching, no consequences, just forgive and forget it. When they receive grace they learn to be gracious to themselves.
5. **Ensure your expectations are developmentally "reasonable".** Statistically speaking, parents of anxious children are likely to either underestimate or over-estimate their child's abilities, coping skills, and stress tolerance. Your child may already have unreasonably high expectations of themselves (which they worry about meeting), ensure you are not compounding this by having

unreasonable standards too. Consult with teachers or parent educators or research about what behaviours and discipline procedures are appropriate for your child's age. For example, the homework of a 16 year old should require less monitoring than an 8 year old. By over-monitoring a 16 year old, one may be communicating a lack of confidence in her and denying her the opportunity to develop the self-discipline skills she needs to independently succeed in life.

6. Discuss or offer a positive alternative the next time a similar situation occurs. Children do not always know the right thing to do in a problematic situation. When correcting them include a statement of instruction on appropriate ways to behave. For example, "we do not run away from the classroom when we do not want to read in class, instead we can... (a), ..(b), or ...(c)." With older children you can guide them through the problem solving process by asking them to tell you a number of possible solutions and selecting the most appealing.

7. Establish your authority as a safety net. Because of their need for personal safety many anxious children become the little directors and authorities in their families. Their controlling behaviors, which may include some non-compliance, are often problematic for parents who do not understand the security need behind it. The misconception most parents develop is that children need to be in control to feel safe. However, what your anxious child needs is for you to affirm yourself as the competent authority figure in their lives; they need to know you are capable and trustworthy of being in control in their lives. This doesn't mean becoming dominant or controlling but it does mean having clear limits, and standing confident in your enforcement of these limits. Based on their own personalities and personal issues, some parents need support as they begin to assert themselves, either from a counselor or partner.

The task of discipline is primary in the role of being a parent but though it has it's challenges (learning by trial and error and retrial) you can be successful in helping your anxious child develop the self-discipline he or she needs to be independently successful in life.