

My 8-year-old child seems to suffer from anxiety or panic attacks. We are a relatively normal family. He has always been a somewhat anxious child but these anxiety attacks are more frequent in the morning before going to school or when my husband and myself have to go out at night. What might be going on?

1. Anxiety in children is very common.
2. There are different approaches one can take to such things as panic attacks.
3. You can teach child techniques for controlling them.
4. You can attempt to understand the underlying need from which the anxiety is emerging.
5. Or you can seek psychological treatments for the anxiety attacks.
6. It is worth initially trying to understand the basic need involved.
7. Children have four basic needs: the need for freedom, safety, control, and belonging.
8. So, what I suggest you do is to operate on the assumption that your child's anxiety is driven by a fear of not having control or influence or of having too much.
9. The goal then is to find out which and then to introduce behaviours in the child's life that maximise responsibility and choice and self-control.
10. You do this by giving the child choices and responsibility. When you give a child a choice you give him control.
11. So, while he cannot have control over whether he goes to school or not, or whether you go out or not, he can be given control of certain things.
12. For example, you could let him choose ahead of time which day he is not going to school and to let him *not* go that day, on condition that he goes all the other days.
13. You could let him choose the mechanism by which he is brought to school – Mom's car or Dad's car or being picked up or walking.
14. When you are going out at night you could get him involved ahead of time in deciding when he could ring you or what clothes you might wear.
15. You could teach him relaxation techniques and get him to decide if he wants to get anxious or to do the techniques.
16. The trick here is even giving him the choice to have his panic attack!
17. If he decides he is going to have one, you can playfully decide which room he will have it in, and when he would like to start!

ANXIOUS CHILDREN

Very often people will say of a child "he or she is just looking for attention". I have rarely found this to be the case. More often than not the child has no interest in attention, but rather is looking for control and influence. You will typically find that the child who is supposedly looking for attention is in fact getting an abundance of it.

A fascinating thing about anxiety and panic for children is that very often, though not always, they are really mechanisms to establish and assess control in certain relationships. The child is often assessing both his own self-control and his parents control over him. Many a parent will be flabbergasted to see their school-phobic child trot off happily to school when a grandmother or auntie is minding him! This

is because that mechanism of assessing CONTROL is not established with the minder.

As I indicated above, a child may have too much control and influence or too little.

Often a child is well able to manage his or her anxiety but provokes and tests the parent's ability to recognise it. The over-anxious parent will find it hard to do this, and so the child displays even more anxiety. You will rarely find an anxious child with an under-involved parent because those children quickly learn to manage themselves because they are left to themselves. Invariably, the parent is on the side of being over-involved or over-concerned, which can create a merry-go-round of anxiety. Sometimes a child needs to be held and encouraged and loved. Other times he needs a tough-loving coach who kicks him onto the field, knowing he can do it.