



# Your Anxious Child

How Parents and Teachers  
Can Relieve Anxiety in Children

Second Edition

John S. Dacey,  
Martha D. Mack  
and Lisa B. Fiore



WILEY Blackwell



# *Praise for Your Anxious Child: How Parents and Teachers Can Relieve Anxiety in Children*

*This supremely practical, compassionate, and wise book offers accessible explanations of how anxiety functions in children's lives, accompanied by a detailed look at what caring adults can do to help anxious children master their worries and fears. With vivid case examples and a wonderfully wide-ranging set of strategies that can be easily adapted to a child's age and style of learning, it will be invaluable to parents and teachers alike.*

**Deborah Hirschland**, MSW, author of *When Young Children Need Help and Collaborative Intervention in Early Childhood*

*As the Executive Director of an agency serving inner-city youth and youngsters in Boston (the UU Urban Ministry), I found many of the suggestions in this book to be invaluable. When the economic and family challenges for young people seem overwhelming, being able to assist them with readily accessible techniques for addressing the underlying anxiety can be critical to their well-being.*

**Rev John E. Hickey**, Cambridge, MA, U.S.

*A caring, thoughtful, and empowering book for parents and teachers who want to better understand and successfully support children with anxiety. I wish I'd had the book at the beginning of my teaching career and would highly recommend it to parents and teachers.*

**Barbara Wilder-Smith**, Director of Content Development,  
*Tools of the Mind*



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My mother suffered from agoraphobia, but she helped me as much as she could with my own anxiety disorder. Thus I dedicate my share of this book to her. JD

I dedicate my share of this book to my family and friends whose enthusiasm and support helped me become an author. MM

My share of this book is lovingly dedicated to Sam, Adam, and Abby, whose energy and enthusiasm bring joy and light into our family every day. LF



# Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
About the Authors	xi
Acknowledgements	xiii
About the Companion Website	xv
1 What Is Anxiety?	1
2 The Eight Types of Anxiety Disorder	23
3 COPE Step One: <i>Calming the Nervous System</i>	39
4 COPE Step Two: <i>Originating an Imaginative Plan</i>	67
5 COPE Step Three: <i>Persisting in the Face of Obstacles</i>	95
6 COPE Step Four: <i>Evaluating the Plan</i>	117
7 Using Anxiety Strategies with Preschoolers	141
8 How Your Parenting Style Can Ease Your Child's Anxiety	161
References	181
Index	187



# List of Illustrations

## Figures

3.1	The general adaptation syndrome	43
3.2	Anxiety tracking record	51
3.3	Anxiety level chart for feelings and thoughts	59
4.1	The Xs test	79
4.2	An example of a highly creative effort on the Xs test	79
4.3	The cat and the box test	80
7.1	Maslow's hierarchy of needs	147
7.2	Icon help you!	159

## Tables

2.1	Representative specific phobias	27
5.1	The typical relationship between the familiarity of situation and the emotional reactions of anxious and imaginative persons	99
6.1	Anxiety levels for four times of day, seven days a week	124
7.1	Developmental stages	142
7.2	Piaget stages 1 and 2	145
7.3	Traits of the typical anxious preschooler	149



## About the Authors



Dr John Dacey teaches courses in creativity and human development at the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, MA. He also has a small practice as a licensed psychotherapist. He is the author of 14 books on the subjects of anxiety, creativity, and human development, including *Your Anxious Child* and *Understanding Creativity: The Interplay of Biological, Psychological and Social Factors*.

He has received a number of public service awards, and frequently does workshops on the subjects of creative problem-solving, dealing with emotional problems in the classroom, post-traumatic stress in the fire station, and social and emotional learning. He is the father of three daughters, and has nine way-above-average grandchildren.



Dr Maggie Mack has worked for 38 years in public and private education to support children and their families from early childhood to high school. She has extensive experience in working with behaviorally challenged children and adolescents, helping families implement positive strategies to decrease anxiety and increase creative problem-solving. Dr Mack has worked with researchers in the area of early childhood curriculum that supports the development of self regulation in young children through reading and

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# About the Companion Website

This book is accompanied by a companion website:

**[www.wiley.com/go/Dacey/Anxiouschild](http://www.wiley.com/go/Dacey/Anxiouschild)**

The website includes extra resources, including videos.



# What Is Anxiety?

*“What good are the best teachers or schools if the most vulnerable kids feel so unsafe that they are unavailable to learn?”<sup>1</sup>*

It’s hard to be the parent of an anxious child. And it is definitely harder than it was when this book was first published 15 years ago, in 2000. In the seven years before 2001, a US Secret Service study of incidents of targeted school shootings found 37 such incidents in US schools.<sup>2</sup> From August to October 2013 alone, there were 16 school shootings resulting in 45 deaths and 78 non-fatal gunshot injuries. “We’ve become numb to this,” President Obama said.<sup>3</sup> Our children haven’t.

While less horrendous, the data for schools around the world indicate a significant increase in school violence.<sup>4</sup> We could cite many other new factors that have increased the level of stress among our children – cyberbullying, “designer” drugs, gangs, high-stakes testing – but there is no need. As a parent and/or an educator, you are surely aware that fear-provoking incidents have become more common in recent decades. In many schools globally, children now regularly

<sup>1</sup> Bornstein (2013)

<sup>2</sup> Vossekuil *et al.* (2002)

<sup>3</sup> Generation Progress (2015)

<sup>4</sup> Benbenishty and Aviastor (2014)

practice not just fire drills, but also safety exercises such as “lock-down drills”. Thus they often estimate the likelihood of their becoming victims as being greater than it really is.

A huge number of children suffer from one (or more) of the eight anxiety disorders – anxiety is currently the most prevalent psychiatric diagnosis in individuals aged 16 and younger. For example, among the United Kingdom’s population, 24 percent will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year. Mixed anxiety and depression is the most common mental disorder. Anxious children are two to four times more likely to develop depression, and as teenagers, they are much more likely to attempt suicide and to become involved with substance abuse.<sup>5</sup>

These dismal data are similar in the United States, Australia, and many other countries, and represent an increase of as much a 10 percent in the past two decades.<sup>6</sup> A major cause worldwide is greater pressure to achieve in school. In an article entitled “Redefining teenage success”, Weiss called for changing the typical parental question from “How did you do on that test?” to “What did you enjoy learning today?” She argues that when children enjoy an experience, they are probably learning something.<sup>7</sup>

Internationally, this position is supported by UNICEF: “Child rights, dignity, participation and equity are at the core of the Council of Europe’s *Child-Friendly Health Care Guidelines*.”<sup>8</sup> It is also backed by a study of 1,004 elementary, middle and high school Asian students aged nine to 19 years, which investigated their levels of generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and separation anxiety. These findings were consistent with studies conducted in Western culture and suggest that the incidence of childhood anxiety is universal.<sup>9</sup>

So how can you help your anxious child? Often you don’t know what is causing her<sup>10</sup> anxiety, and sometimes you’re not even aware that she is feeling frightened. Anxiety has been called the “silent affliction”

<sup>5</sup> Mental health/UK (2014)

<sup>6</sup> Stamopoulos (2014)

<sup>7</sup> Weiss (2014, p. A13)

<sup>8</sup> Poirier (2014)

<sup>9</sup> Lu *et al.* (2007)

<sup>10</sup> We have chosen to use the feminine pronoun “she” in the first chapter, and will alternate it with “he” in the succeeding chapters.

because most sufferers try, and are able, to hide their distress from others. What can you as a parent do?



### ***The Concerns of Four Worried Parents***

“My Katie is a little chatterbox, but when you ask her to perform, even for the family, she gets so nervous that she freezes up. I wish I could help her relax more.”

“Almost since he was a baby, Jose has been a ‘clinger’. He hated starting kindergarten and even now in the third grade, he misses me and can’t wait to get home. He’s always worrying that something bad will happen. We thought up a plan to help him be less frightened, but it just didn’t work out.”

“Our Damian is terrified of animals. He hates to walk down the street by himself. He thinks a squirrel is going to jump out at him! We took him to a psychologist who helped him think about his fears differently, and for while he was a lot better. Then a dog barked at him and he just gave up.”

“I wouldn’t say Felicia has a disorder. She does most of the things the other kids do – it’s just that she worries about doing everything. She’s very capable, but she’s always afraid she’s going to screw up. She works hard to get over her fears and we tell her that she is doing better. She just can’t see it, though. She just doesn’t realize the improvements she’s made.”



These statements reflect the four central problems that all anxious children face:

1. They find it harder than other children to calm themselves when they are in a stressful situation.
2. Although many of them are above average in creativity,<sup>11</sup> they seldom use this ability when thinking of strategies and tactics for coping with their anxiety because they have become inflexible in their thinking.
3. Even when they do have a good plan, they tend to become discouraged after a while and often quit trying.

<sup>11</sup> Dacey and Conklin (2013); Zhao (2009, 2011)