

GROWING UP

Listening to the Butterflies in Your Tummy

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Sammie looks up at his mother and whispers, “I don’t want to do this. What if I fail?” Sammie’s eyes are wide and his lips are trembling. It almost looks like his whole body is shaking. The mother replies, “You have to Sammie, it is your assignment and we have worked too long on this for you to screw it up. Remember, our family only gets top grades in school.” Sammie does not look convinced as he quietly says, “OK, mommy.”

Right before Sammie’s mother drops off Sammie for school, Sammie is complaining, “I got butterflies in my tummy. I can’t go to school.” Mom dismisses this saying, “You are just nervous even though there is nothing to be nervous about. Your presentation is so easy.” Sammie is quiet and gets out of the car to go to school. Later that day, Sammie’s teacher calls his mother and tells her that Sammie is with the school nurse complaining about a stomachache.

This situation or something like it can be common for many families. In this case, Sammie is displaying classic signs of anxiety with the butterflies in his tummy. Some children are more prone to being apprehensive in situations or have excessive fears over real or imagined things. The question for parents is in how to deal with such a behavior so as to make it less likely it will happen in the future.

While all children are different, children like Sammie require parents who adopt parenting strategies that serve to lessen their child’s anxiety. One way to lessen anxiety is to remember that an anxious child is not willfully misbehaving but rather reflects his or her inability to control it. Critical and disparaging comments only worsen the anxiety.

In addition, it is important to maintain realistic and attainable goals and expectations. If parents tell their child that perfection is expected then the child will try to please the parent to the point of increasing his or her worry and anxiety. Rather, let the child know that making mistakes is part of growing up. Praise good effort even if the child falls short of perfection.

Parents can also teach their anxious child a variety of ways to deal with anxiety. Some ways include organizing materials and time, learning how to relax under stressful situations, and practicing things until a comfort level is reached. Finally, listening and talking to your child on a regular basis can relieve the child’s anxiety. It is important to not be critical or minimize what the child is experiencing. Also, try to avoid giving too much advice. Many times the act of listening and being there for the child is much more effective than an adult lecture on what the child should do.

If you suspect that your child is more anxious than others his or her age, contact a school counselor, school psychologist, and/or psychologist as these professionals can bring additional resources to deal with the anxiety.