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TIPS FOR HELPING A CHILD DEAL WITH ANXIETY

By: Jamie Edelbrock

I'll be honest. The water scares me. Whenever my children are in it or near it, anxious thoughts creep in my head. I even get nervous in boats, large or small. That's why I was hesitant when we were invited to float down the Shenandoah River in Virginia with friends. Just in case you haven't experienced a float down a river, it's typically done in an innertube and is mostly a slow, fun-filled, and relaxing time. It's a popular summer activity in Virginia, West Virginia, Oregon, and many other parts of the US. My husband and three children were excited to go, so despite my nerves, I agreed. To help with my anxiety about it, I made plans in my head about the trip. I planned to keep the innertubes close together, would keep a close watch on the children, and I constantly reassured myself we'd all be okay.

The day of the trip was mostly uneventful. We linked up with friends, checked in, got our life jackets, briefings, signed paperwork, and loaded a bus to head upriver. Once in the calm water, I told myself we were fine as we floated down the beautiful river. Hearing the children laugh and splash was a refreshing sound that calmed me. Good right? Well, about an hour into the float, the serenity quickly left me as we approached what we later discovered was a class 2 rapid. The worst part? We had no choice to go through it. Several tubers had stopped short of it, examining the best route through. We followed suit. Others proceeded through, smiling and laughing as they came out the other side. After watching a few tubers pass through without issue, we charted our course best we could and continued toward the rapids.

As we approached, I was filled with fear as I watched my three children start to go down the rapids on individual tubes. We proceeded partly through unscathed until suddenly, two of my daughters flipped backward in the rocky, heavy flowing water. My middle daughter hit her knee and emerged from the water with a few cuts. I was relieved to see her head pop up. However, my youngest daughter was nowhere to be seen. The water was flowing swiftly, and the white water made it difficult to see anything. Fortunately, the water was shallow enough that my husband and I could stand, albeit with difficulty due to the rapids. As we searched the area, people could tell we were in distress and were trying to stop their canoes and rafts, but they couldn't. The current was too strong. Meanwhile, our friends had successfully stopped 100 feet downstream, grabbed our two older daughters, and had made their way to the bank.

Knowing my youngest daughter was in trouble, I let go of my fear and frantically searched the water for her. The current was strong, and my bare feet hurt as I stepped on each sharp stone. I was scared, cold, wet, and in pain, but I wasn't about to give up. She needed help, and as her parent, I was willing to do anything in my power to help her. My husband was upstream about 100 feet doing the same. We had both assumed she separated from her innertube, but I noticed that it was stuck on a rock near me.

When I finally arrived at her upside-down innertube, I pushed the heavy tube aside and found her. Her life jacket was caught under a rock, and she was face down. As I grabbed her, she gasped for air and cried, clinging to me like crazy. With the panic of the situation over, I quickly examined her, and other than the scary experience, she was fine. After a few minutes of calming down, my husband made his way to us. The three of us then floated downstream using our life jackets to link up with our other children and friends. The worst part? We still had 3 hours of the river left to float but no worries, there were no more unannounced rapids. I didn't realize it at the time, but this experience foreshadowed a groundbreaking moment in our future. Let me explain.

When my daughter was diagnosed with anxiety at the age of six, much like the rapids, I was taken by surprise. Up until her diagnosis, I thought she was just misbehaving. She was disruptive in class and would abruptly run to the bathroom to hide. She would scream and have angry outbursts. She would slam doors and yell at me all the time. She would rip up books, ruin her toys, and refuse to eat. When she would raise her voice, I would raise mine. When she slammed a door, I would slam mine. When I got the dreaded phone call from the school saying she did something wrong, she would get in trouble at home. It was a never-ending cycle, and I couldn't figure out why she was behaving this way.

It wasn't until we met with her therapist that I learned that behavior issues and anxiety issues could look very similar. It can be challenging to distinguish between the two. I learned that she wasn't misbehaving on purpose; she was reacting to her anxiety. I also learned that she needed two things from me. She needed me to educate myself on anxiety and she needed me to change how I responded to her behavior.

Like all parents, I will do everything in my power to protect my children, and sometimes that means being selfless. Just like when I let go of my fear and jumped off my innertube to rescue my daughter, I let go of my former way of dealing with her behavior and jumped into learning how to help her. Instead of slamming doors, yelling back, and punishing her, I learned what she needed most from me was for me to be calm. I also began researching and learning about anxiety so I could best understand her.

During my research, I found a quote from the award-winning author of Little Hearts/Gentle Parenting Guide, L.R. Knost. It put things in perspective for me. She says, "When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it's our job to share our calm, not join their chaos."

I found this to be true because as I started to change my daughter began to change as well. Instead of slamming the door back, I would tell her I was here for her when she was ready to talk. Instead of yelling, I told her I needed a timeout and would talk when I was ready. This allowed us to collect our own thoughts and calm ourselves so we could have a productive and peaceful conversation.

Some other strategies that worked the best for us can be found on www.youngminds.org.uk in an article titled "Helping Your Child With Anxiety".

- Breathe slowly and deeply together. You can count slowly to five as you breathe in, and then five as you breathe out. If this is too much, try starting with shorter counts. If it works for them, gradually encourage your child to breathe out for one or two counts longer than they breathe in, as this can help their body relax.
- Sit with them and offer calm physical reassurance. Feeling you nearby, or holding your hand or having a cuddle if it's possible, can be soothing.
- Reassure them that the anxiety will pass and that they will be okay. It can be helpful to describe it as a wave that they can ride or surf until it peaks, breaks and gets smaller.
- Ask them to think of a safe and relaxing place or person in their mind. If you haven't tried this before, agree with them when they're feeling calm what this place or person is. It could be their bedroom, a grandparent's house, a favorite place in nature or somewhere they've been on holiday. Sometimes holding a memento of a relaxing place, like a seashell or pebble, can help.
- Try using all five senses together. Connecting with what they can see, touch, hear, smell and taste can bring them closer to the present moment and reduce the intensity of their anxiety. You might think together about five things they can see, four things they can touch, three things they can hear, two things they can smell and one thing they can taste.
- Encourage them to do something that helps them to feel calmer. This could be running, walking, listening to music, painting, drawing or coloring-in, writing in a journal, watching a favorite film or reading a favorite book.

Children with anxiety have big emotions that are hard for them to understand and make sense of. They count on their parents to be their protector and compass, which means it matters greatly how we respond to them during the chaos. Using our tubing trip as a parallel, the outcome would have been very different had I stayed on my inner tube in fear, rather than jumping off to save my daughter. If you are surprised by your child's anxiety diagnosis, jump off and dive in. Push stigmas and fear aside and go all-in because it's equally important to help your child with mental health as it is when they're in physical danger. Learn all that you can and change what needs to be changed because the outcome is worth it.

About Jamie Edelbrock

Born and raised in Salem, Oregon, Jamie is married to her high school sweetheart, and together they have three beautiful daughters. She has worn many hats, some of which include a homeschool mom, preschool director, family ministry director, and author. Through years of experience working with children, and raising her own, she knows how difficult parenting can be. She encourages others by sharing her own trials, triumphs, and sometimes hilarious stories. She is an advocate for children's mental health and is best known for her creativity, optimism, and kind heart.