

Connection Rituals TO BATTLE ANXIETY

Anxiety is often (but not always) a symptom of disconnection - something you will learn more about in our online course: [Childhood Anxiety: Understanding and Helping Children Heal](#).



Even if this isn't the source of the anxiety, the connection with the caregiver most often *relieves* the anxiety. This has to do with our innate drive to 'be in attachment' with our caregivers.

Being attached means that your child feels loved, is comforted when distressed, and that their needs are consistently met (physical and emotional): **the essence of emotional and psychological safety**. There is also physical safety at stake here - we are bigger and stronger than our children. We are meant to care for, protect, feed, and shelter our children, and we do this because we *love* our children - we have an attachment. If a child senses any disconnection from this attachment, the brain stem and limbic system registers this as a **life-threatening event** (even if it just means mom or dad is simply more distracted because they have more on their plate at work, or have less time because of the arrival of a new sibling).

To break it down, from a biological perspective, if we do not "love" our children then we might not protect and provide for them - **children's instincts are primed to watch for signs of a parent pulling away because their survival depends on them being loveable to their caregivers!**

Now with this all being said, we cannot constantly be in a connected state with our children: **we have jobs, other children, housework, activities to get our kids to, other commitments etc.** So when we *have* these small blocks of time in the day to give to our kids, we want to really capitalize on these moments to keep their cups full until the next time we connect.



So where do you start?

Here are our favorite connection rituals to soothe anxiety, and foster resiliency, in children and teens:

1. CONNECT BEFORE SEPARATION

Being away from parents/primary caregivers is hard on kids - even when they become teens. In order for children to feel psychological safety when they're away from us, they have to be able to hold the connection in their mind and get a good dose of bonding hormones (known as oxytocin) before we send them off into the world. Customizing a good-bye ritual is an essential to building a healthy attachment, and to mitigate against the effects of anxiety.

Here are a few examples: For preschool and elementary aged children, we love the book "The Kissing Hand" (Audrey Penn) and "The Invisible String" (Patrice Karst). Once you read *The Kissing Hand*, you will be able to give your child a kiss in their hand to remind them that they will be in your heart throughout the day. With *The Invisible String*, you will be able to draw from the narrative of the book and

use that imaginary string (wrapped around your finger and then around your child's finger) to stay connected throughout the day until you are reunited. You could also try sending them with an object from home that reminds them of you such as a stuffed toy or picture.

With older children, your tweens and teens, we simply suggest carving out something short and simple, but meaningful. With my eleven-year old: I simply make eye contact, tell her I love her, point out something good she did that day or the day before (appreciation), and mention something I'm looking forward to doing with her that evening (and make sure you always follow through).

2. BEDTIME TALK

Bed time is such an imperative time for parents to re-connect after a busy day - **children and parents are often coming to the table with empty cups**. What better time to fill that cup before a child moves into the biggest, often most anxiety provoking disconnection of the day: *sleep!*

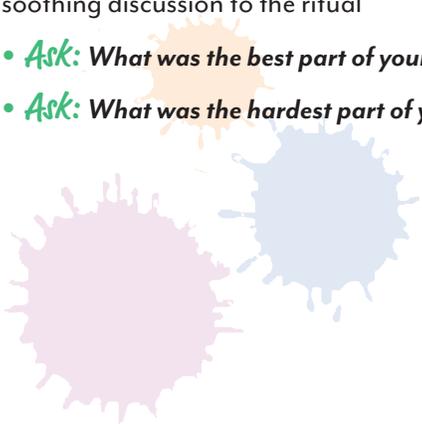
We always encourage parents to have a very succinct routine (*i.e., snack, bath, books, cuddle, lights out*) - predictability soothes children's anxiety. We also suggest adding some soothing discussion to the ritual

- **Ask:** *What was the best part of your day?*
- **Ask:** *What was the hardest part of your day?*

- **Share** with your child 3 things they did well (specifically highlighting ways in which they successfully conquered a fear, or accomplished something that was difficult and didn't give up) - this builds confidence and competence in children.

- For older children (10 years +), I also recommend adding this: **What is a mistake you made today, and how will you like to handle it differently next time?**

Anxious children are often perfectionistic or avoidant of situations where they could make a mistake, and we want them to understand that mistakes are *good!!* That's where we learn from our mistakes and grow as human beings.



3. QUALITY TIME

When was the last time you spent an hour with your child - and only your child - with no distractions? No cell phone, TV, or other children around? Most parents tell us it's rare, and that's why integrating this ritual is so precious.

We suggest carving out time to spend time with your anxious child one-on-one where she takes the lead and decides what you are going to do together. This choice is so imperative, as it allows your child a healthy sense of control (and anxious children often feel out of control) and empowers her with the ability to think, cooperate, and to feel really good about herself....and you!

Some Guidelines:

- Set a date and time weekly (we suggest daily if you can): Keep this consistent; 10-60 min
- It's the one time a day where your child runs the show; let them lead and decide what they want to do
- Set a timer so they know when time is over
- Enjoy your child: offer extra warmth, extra eye contact, and show interest in her/his choices
- End with lots of affection

Note: Best to be used for something other than video games or surfing Youtube, but if it's the only thing your child is interested in, then engage with them on this electronic journey with gusto!

4. LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE

So we all love to laugh and smile - *and kids have a tendency to do this must better and more often than adults.* We all know how much better we feel after watching a funny movie, or laughing with a friend about an inside joke, and now there is science to back up why this is! It turns out laughter reduces the production of stress hormones (adrenalin and cortisol).

Since these hormones are a leading cause of the stress response in the brain and body, why not use a natural remedy designed by mother nature! Watch a funny movie, engage your child in a pillow fight, joke with your teen, make an unexpected ridiculous voice in response to his question, play games with him. . . whatever makes your child laugh and smile. It will be good for you too!

5. 5 POSITIVES FOR EVERY 1 NEGATIVE

In his foundational research, John Gottman (The Gottman Institute), learned that couples who stay happily married have a trait that couples who eventually divorce do not - *they engage in minimally 5 positive interactions for every negative.* As it turns out this same research can apply to our parenting! So, for every negative interaction you have with your child (i.e., you raise your voice, you ignore a bid for attention/ connection, your teen rolls their eyes at you) try to aspire to compensate for that disconnection with 5 positives.

Nothing crazy or complex, just something simple that says:

I love you, I see you, and I'm here:

- A hug or kiss
- A joke
- A pat on the back
- Kiss on the forehead
- Arm around the shoulder or pat on the leg
- Words of affirmation: *"I love you . . . I'm proud of you . . . I noticed that (something positive they did) . . . I'm grateful for you. . I'm excited to (something you plan on doing together) . . ."*