

# Our Kids and Anxiety: Risk, Resilience, and Solutions

*Tracy Dennis-Tiwary*

Hunter College & The Graduate Center of The City  
University of New York

CITY UNIVERSITY  
OF NEW YORK  
THE  
GRADUATE  
CENTER

**CUNY HUNTER**

# The Teen Anxiety and Brain (TAB) Study



Tracy Dennis-Tiwary,  
Ph.D.  
Hunter College &  
Graduate Center, CUNY



Amy Roy, Ph.D.  
Fordham & NYU



Carrie Masia Werner, Ph.D.  
Montclair State University & NYU



David Yap  
NYU



Sarah Myruski, Ph.D.  
Fordham & NYU



Sam Berthod, M.A.  
Graduate Center, CUNY



Mariah DeSerisy  
Fordham

# What is Anxiety?

# Anxiety is a Normal Emotion

- Anxiety is a vague sense of apprehension and fear about possible, uncertain danger or negative events
- **All children experience anxiety**, common during development:
  - Fear of dark, separation around 18 mos., others?
- Anxiety has many faces
  - Shy and inhibited children are not necessarily anxious
  - Impulsive and easily-frustrated children may be anxious
- Remember, that anxiety is a double-edged sword
  - Moderate levels can help performance
  - Signals a discrepancy between present and future goals
  - You're only anxious when you care

# Anxiety Isn't Always Obvious

## What to look for?

- Quiet, reserved
- Not willing to try new things.
- “I can’t do it.”
- Child resists interaction with peers
- May sit alone in the library or cafeteria, hang back
- Frustration to the point of tears and/or angry outbursts.

# Impact

- Difficulty with public speaking, reading aloud, being called on in class, gym class
- Avoid participating in school activities like dances, clubs, sports teams, plays
- Trouble asking for help or missed assignments
- May not be able to complete assignments
- May not enter class if late
- Refusal to attend school

# When is Anxiety a Problem? The Four D's

**Disproportion** - Is the distress unrealistic given

- Developmental stage?
- Situation?

**Disruption** - Is the distress interfering with daily functioning in

- Social activities?
- Academic performance?
- Family relationships?

# When is Anxiety a Problem? The Four D's

**Distress** - Burdensome and bothersome

**Duration** - Is the child able to recover from anxiety/distress when the event is not present?

- Symptom of “worrying” about future occurrence of event/object
- Anxiety/distress occurs across multiple settings
- **Lack of Flexibility**



# Importance of Anxiety in Children

- Among the most common mental health problems in children
  - Prevalence estimated at 5-10% population
- Developmental progression of anxiety disorders
  - Increased risk of later depressive disorders
  - Evidence for some anxiety disorders staying stable into adulthood

Albano, Chorpita, & Barlow (2003). Childhood Anxiety Disorders. In Mash & Barkley (Eds.). *Child Psychopathology: Second Edition*. (pp. 279-329). New York: Guildford Press.

# Talking to Our Kids About Anxiety

# Be Empathic

- Accept anxiety
- Listen without judgement
- **Conversation starter:** Talk about something that has made you anxious, and then invite your child to share his or her worries.

# Acknowledge Their Worries as Real

- One way to make sure you're not dismissing your child's anxiety is to **acknowledge it as real**.
- BUT also teach children the difference between healthy and excessive worry – and challenge their “disproportionate” worries

# Give Prompts and Openings But Don't Tell Them What They Feel

- Kids want to please adults, and will often answer yes to close-ended questions
- **Conversation starter:** "I know some kids are scared of \_\_\_\_\_. Maybe you feel that way or maybe you don't feel that way?"
- Be specific about feelings of anxiety.

# Let Children Know that Anxiety is a Fleeting Feeling

- Anxiety is not forever, like all feelings they naturally come and go
  - Find a metaphor (e.g., tides, a rainstorm)
- Sit with them and help them feel anxiety reduce as they try out some coping strategies

# Empower Children

- Teach children that they CAN manage their anxiety
  - Believing we have the ability and resources to cope actually help us cope
- **Being with rather than escaping from feelings of anxiety is a key to getting anxiety under control**
  - Belief in ability is key

# How Does Anxiety Work?



# Through Thoughts, Anxiety Pulls Us Into the Uncertain Future



# Understanding Each Child: The Power of “Seeing” Our Children

- Observe what anxiety looks like in your child
- Ask your child what he/she gets nervous about and what he/she feels like
- Generate an overall picture of anxiety in your child

# Thinking Traps

- **All or Nothing Thinking**  
“I have to do this perfectly or I’m no good.”  
“I’m never any good at \_\_\_\_\_”
- **Mind Reading/ Jumping to Conclusions**  
“They think I am crazy.”
- **Catastrophizing**  
“This is the worst thing that could ever happen.”
- **Fear of fear and worry about worry**  
“If I become anxious something bad will happen”
- **Intolerance of uncertainty (IUC)**  
“It is unacceptable that negative events *may* occur, even if the possibility is very small” - worry is an effort to find “correct” solutions
- **Disqualifying the Positive – threat bias**  
“It was just luck, it’ll never go right again.”

# Power of Avoidance

## Negative reinforcement spiral



Jessie is afraid to  
go to the party

She stays home instead

She avoids feeling anxious  
nothing bad happens—  
staying home  
is rewarded



# Helping Our Kids Cope With Anxiety

After Talking and Understanding, What Next?

# Context

- What are the situations in which the child becomes anxious?
- Is there anything that can be done to modify the situation to reduce anxiety?
- How can the child identify the physical cues that predict anxiety (Butterflies, heart racing, sweating, etc.,...)?



# Help Kids Identify Signs of Anxiety

- Tuning in is the first step to coping – anxious kids often have to learn how to do this!
  - Pounding heart, shortness of breath, tight muscles
  - Worried thoughts
- Anxiety lives in the body, even though it might originate in the imagination, or a real life situation.
- Some children might experience anxiety as stomachaches

# Teach Coping Strategies

- Identifying anxious thoughts and practicing new ones
- Relaxation strategies
  - Progressive muscle relaxation
  - They can learn to use before and in the moment of fearful situations
- Writing exercises
  - Tuning into anxiety
  - Catching unhelpful thoughts
  - Reinterpretating
- Engage don't avoid

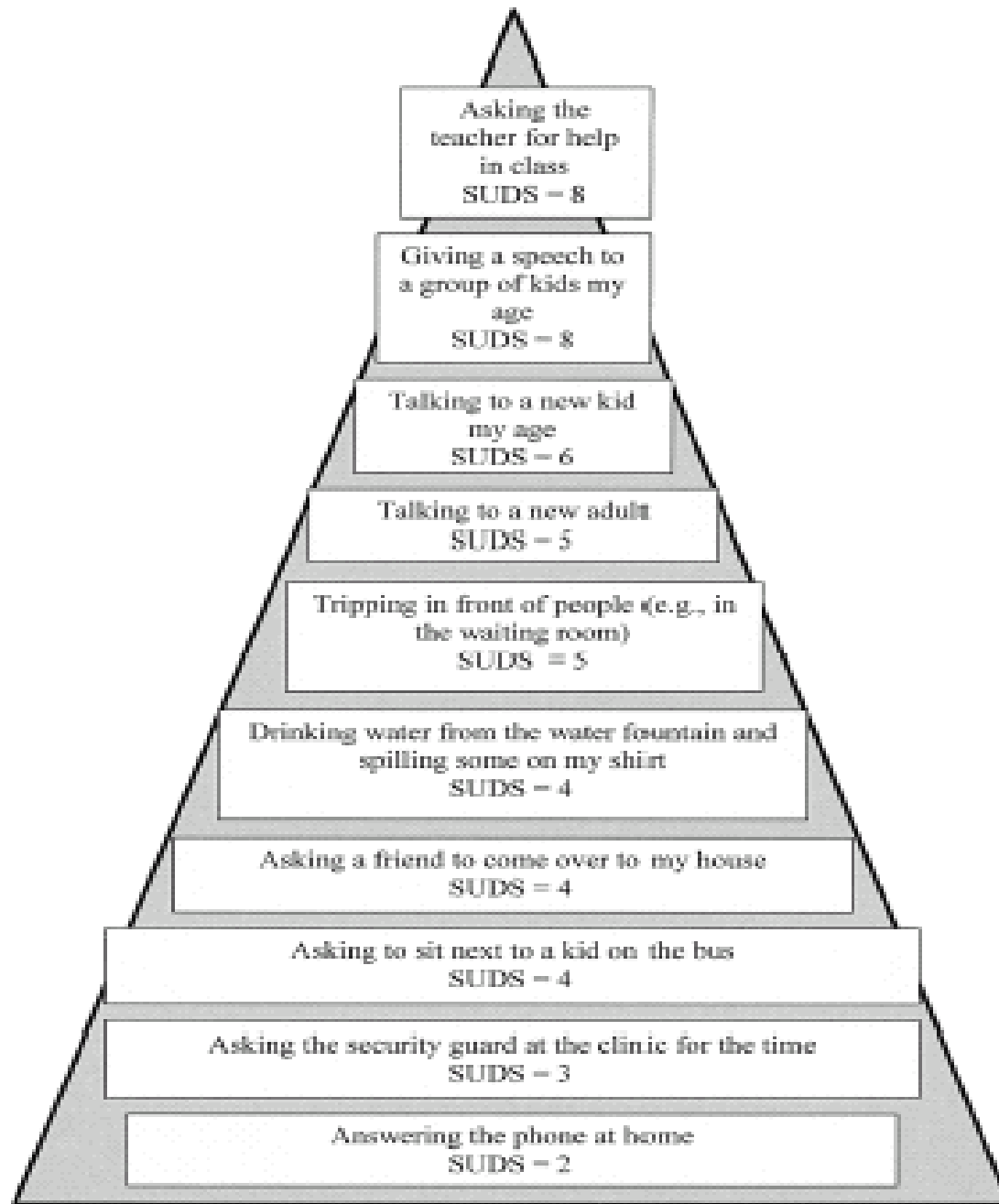


# DON'T Help Anxious Children Avoid

- Parents, don't"
  - Rescue child
  - Reinforce or encourage avoidant behavior
  - May model anxious behavior
- Teachers, don't:
  - Avoid calling on the student
  - Lower academic expectations
  - Exclude student from small group work and partnerships.

# Combat Avoidance with Exposure

- Important for child to experience situation and NOT AVOID
- Use graded exposure- start with easier situations to develop
- Watch for subtle avoidance
- Reward efforts- determine ahead of time



# When to refer to mental health professionals?

- No qualified school personnel to conduct an assessment or school-based intervention
- Anxiety meets 4-D criteria
- Child's symptoms are complex and suggestive of multiple diagnoses
- Suicidal thoughts or intentions
- Anxiety extends across situations

# Resources

## Websites

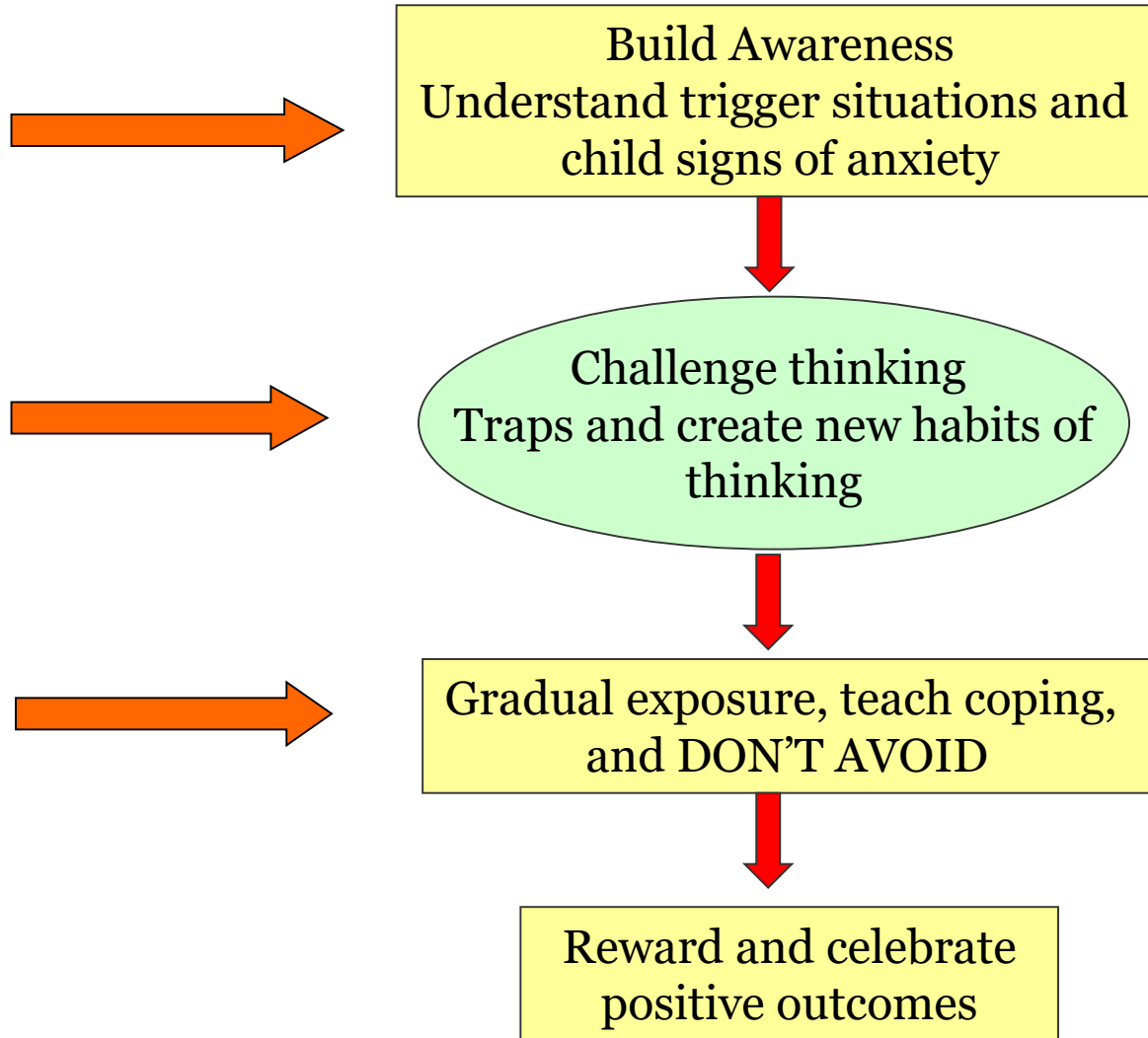
- [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)
- [www.AboutOurKids.org](http://www.AboutOurKids.org)
- [www.childmind.org](http://www.childmind.org)

# Resources cont.

## Books

- Freeing Your Child From Anxiety (Chansky)
- Social Anxiety and Social Phobia in Youth (Kearney)
- Helping Your Anxious Child (Rapee et al)
- Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child (Manassis et al)
- More Than Moody (Koplewicz)

# Summary



# Thank you!

[tracy.dennis@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:tracy.dennis@hunter.cuny.edu)

[tracy@personalzen.com](mailto:tracy@personalzen.com)



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