

Alan Hu Foundation Mental Health Lecture Series

When the World Seems Like a Scary Place: Essential Conversations for Anxious Parents and Worried Children

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and Director of the Institute for Innovation in Social Work Research
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CHIH-CHING HU: Welcome everyone to Alan Hu Foundation Mental Health Lecture Series. I'm Chih-Ching Hu, co-founder of Alan Hu Foundation and host for your webinar today. Dr. Abigail Gewirtz will present *When the World Seems Like a Scary Place: Essential Conversations for Anxious Parents and Worried Children*.

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We'd like to thank Tri-Valley Nonprofit Alliance and Three Valleys Community Foundation for their generous grants to fund this webinar. We'd also like to thank the Mental Health Association for Chinese Communities for providing simultaneous Chinese interpretation, and thank you to Ida Shaw for Chinese interpretation.

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Alan Hu Foundation's mission is to promote mental health, raise awareness, and remove stigma surrounding psychiatric disorders, and support fundamental research for cures. Please consider making a gift to Alan Hu Foundation by using the donation link in the chat box. Thank you for supporting our programs.

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Today, it is our great honor and privilege to introduce Dr. Abigail Gewirtz. Dr. Gewirtz is a child psychologist, mother of four, and Foundation Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University. She's a clinician, researcher, program developer, and trainer of providers.

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Dr. Gewirtz's research examines preventive interventions to strengthen families affected by traumatic stressors. With her research team, she develops, tests, and examines the widespread implementation of parenting interventions for diverse families. A fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and the American Psychological Association, she has been invited to speak in the U.S. and across the world on parenting in times of stress. For many children and adolescents, the outside world can feel scary. Parents, who themselves may be anxious, often lack the tools to help their children. Based on Dr. Gewirtz's book by the same name, this webinar aims to help parents help their children manage a scary world by using an everyday tool at everyone's disposal: conversations. This webinar is being recorded. Recordings will be available on the Alan Hu Foundation website and Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel in about one to two weeks. Please subscribe to the Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel.

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Following the presentation, there will be a Q&A session. Please use the Zoom Q&A function to submit your questions. During the presentation, there will be interactive sessions to ask for your input. Please also use the Q&A function to submit your answers. The presentation is for educational purposes only, and it is not intended for medical diagnosis. If you have any persistent symptoms, please seek professional help. With that, I'm turning to Dr. Gewirtz. Welcome, Dr. Gewirtz. Thank you for being here.

[00:03:16]

DR. ABIGAIL GEWIRTZ: Thank you, thank you so much, Chih-Ching, for the kind introduction. Um, and it's a pleasure and an honor to be with you, and I'm really, um, impressed by the work that the foundation does. So thank you for doing that work. Today we're going to talk a little bit about when the world feels like a scary place. And, uh, as Chih-Ching mentioned, this is the name of a book that I wrote about four years ago, but it doesn't feel any less relevant now. Um, so what we'll cover today is we'll talk a little bit, um, just do an introduction. Um, actually we don't need to do much of that since you, uh, kindly introduced me.

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Unfortunately, my book is not available in Chinese, but it is available in Korean and Russian, as well as English. Um, today we'll talk, uh, about bad news and scary events. And I think everybody would agree that we are living in a world that can feel quite scary, whether it's because of, uh, the impending threats of climate change, and, uh, whether it's because of the violence that we see all too often erupt in our schools, uh, whether it's hearing about, um, concerns related to mass migration, um, the relentless effects of technology in our lives, and particularly in the lives of our children.

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So we'll talk a little bit about bad news and scary events. We'll start by talking about parents, and that's what I'm going to ask you to think about—your own lives. I think many of the people who are here are parents. Um, and if you're not a parent, I bet you have a child in your life. And if you don't have a child in your life, you were a child once, I bet. Um, so we're also going to talk about children and about development, and about the impact of anxiety, or I should say where anxiety fits in development. We'll talk a little bit about nature and about nurture—what we bring with us and what happens in our lives that relates to how we deal with anxiety.

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We'll talk about children and emotions, and then we'll get to essential conversations, um, as a way to help children manage big feelings relating to scary outside world events. Um, and then we'll have—I'll leave plenty of room for Q&A. Um, so we should have about 10 or 15 minutes for Q&A. Um, so that's the structure of our webinar today.

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So let's talk, um, for a short while about bad news and stressful events. And, um, you'll see the picture to the right-hand side of the screen is a very familiar one, because whenever we get on an airplane, um, we are told to put our own masks on before assisting others. And I really like that analogy because, um, when we're dealing—you know, when we're parents and we're dealing with stressful events—if we don't put our own mask on before helping our children, that is, if we don't pay attention to our own feelings

and what, um, how we tend to cope and how we think about, um, stressful events, um, or anxiety-provoking events, then it's going to be very hard to have enough oxygen, as it were, to help our children.

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But I want to start by thinking with you, um, about how you feel when we get bad news, because what we know is that what stresses us stresses our children. And so if you think about the last time you, um, got bad news—and that could be, um, sort of hearing about the illness of a friend or a family member, or even something stressful that happened at work, even on the drive home—you know, someone nearly cut you off on the highway, or, um, you looked, um, you know, you heard just something on the news that made you feel stressed. What I want you to, um, think about—and I'm sorry, on my slide it says "write in the chat box," but what I mean you to do is write in the Q&A—is how do you feel in your body when you get bad news? What do you think about, and what do you feel?

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And so, for example, I, um, when I get bad news, the first thing that I feel is my heart beating fast, right? So, and that is a sort of a sign for me of, um, this is what's going on, is stressing me. Um, some people get sweaty palms. Um, so I don't know, Chih-Ching, feel free to just, um, if people are writing in the chat, to just unmute and let me know what people are saying about where they—where they feel stress in their body. Yeah, what they think.

[00:08:15]

CHIH-CHING HU: Yeah, people answered. I can feel my adrenaline and cortisol spiking.

[00:08:37]

DR. ABIGAIL GEWIRTZ: That's really, um, that's very—that's very detailed, thank you. And, um, stomach—that's a big one, right? You get knots or nausea or butterflies. Chest tight, chest—fantastic. Um, some people get backaches, and they feel that they've been hunching their shoulders, um, or they, or they, you know, their back just feels very tight. So thank you. So these are all ways that stress happens to us in our body. Um, and now I want to ask you, if you live with a partner or a co-parent, how does your partner deal with stress? Because, of course, all of us are individuals, and we all, um, certainly when we're in relationships, we come to the relationship with different, um, approaches, with different temperaments and characteristics.

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And so while you're thinking about how your partner feels when he or she gets bad news, or what they think, or what you see them—how you see them react or respond, so I want to sort of talk about different approaches. You know, I'm British originally. Um, I come from England, as you might be able to hear, and, uh, England is the home of the stiff upper lip. And I love the, um, the metaphor of the stiff upper lip, because it literally sort of refers to the idea that we might want to yell and scream, or we might want to cry, but we don't let that upper lip move. We keep calm and carry on, which is a sort of World War II phrase that I think has become very, um, um, sort of very, very popular.

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Um, on the other hand, there's the "let it all out" philosophy or approach, which is, you know, if I'm angry, I am going to come in and let everybody know that. And the reality is that most of us are

somewhere in the middle. You know, few of us always keep a stiff upper lip, or try and keep calm and carry on, which, um, you know, we sometimes refer to—not, you know, in a sort of—to connote that this is not such a great way of responding on a continual basis—as emotional suppression, literally attempting to suppress what we’re thinking.

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And then, of course, the “let it all out” is this idea of, you know, what we feel, we must let out. And of course, all the time, you know, that’s also not such a regulated way of responding. So I don’t know, um, Chih-Ching, whether, um, people have talked about their, um, their partners and what their partners do differently from them. Um, but maybe you want to weigh in on the chat, on the Q&A.

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CHIH-CHING HU: Yeah, um, oh, there’s another comment: lock it down and go to the woods and nature to relax and find his center.

[00:11:27]

DR. ABIGAIL GEWIRTZ: Oh, that’s lovely. Thank you. So there are lots of different ways of dealing with bad news. And I love the ways that you, um, that you just mentioned, because it—it’s perfect leading for the next point, which is, um, we can react sometimes. We get bad news, it literally—we say it hits us—and we react immediately.

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Um, we might yell, or we might cry, or we might, um, you know, just sort of let it out. And that, um, is really sort of, um, you know, our child might come in and say, uh, “I got into trouble at school because I didn’t do my homework last night.” That’s a very common one. And, um, we might be really upset with our child because we’ve had a conversation with that child beforehand and ask, “What, again? You didn’t do your homework again?”

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Didn’t we talk about it a hundred times, and blah, blah, blah, blah? And if you can imagine, if you’re a parent, then you can think about what your child—what that, um, that sort of impulsive reaction, that sort of spilling out as soon as you hear the news—might have, um, what influence that might have on your child.

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Um, some of you, I’m guessing, will say your child will burst into tears and storm upstairs to their room. Uh, may not—may be quiet, not say anything. May yell back. Um, but I want to distinguish here between what I call reacting versus responding. So, uh, reacting is something very impulsive. It’s something we do immediately. It almost happens to us. We almost react before we understand that we’re feeling, uh, upset or stressed or, uh, anxious or whatever the feeling is.

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Um, responding intentionally is the opposite of that. Um, when we respond intentionally, we understand what’s happening to us. So, um, somebody, um, you know, let’s take the child example. Our child comes in and gives bad news, um, and instead of going straight out there with, “What, again?”

Um, an intentional response might be to take a deep breath, essentially to create a little space between what happened and your response. And in that space—that little breath, or going to the woods, as someone said, or just being quiet and centering, maybe, uh, standing with your feet on the ground and feeling the ground beneath you—

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Um, you are creating a space to be able to respond intentionally. And the intentional part is you choose, and we'll talk a little bit more about that. Um, and so I want to ask you—and I promise I won't be asking you all the time—there's maybe one more in the presentation, one more opportunity to, um, comment in the Q&A. But what are your strategies for creating the little space when bad news hits? So how do you stay calm or recover when bad news hits? What are your strategies for regulating your emotions? Um, and so, Chih-Ching, whenever you have a good, you know, good number of them and want to share them, I would be happy if you'd like to do that. Oh, okay. Um, we're still waiting for people to come in, so I can share some of the strategies that, um, I use and that people close to me use.

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You know, I think I am a very, very, very great proponent of ten deep breaths, um, because they buy me time. I will sometimes say, if I'm in a physical proximity to someone who's angry or upset, sad, or something's happened, I'll offer a glass of water. Not only does that—you know, the offering of something helps the other person—but it buys me a little bit of time. It's one of my favorite strategies to be able to, um, sort of, um, calm myself and take some breaths.

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Yeah, um, people—some people say count to ten. Lovely. And the strategies for regulating emotion: take a deep breath and step away from the situation and come back to it later. Absolutely. People say pray, step aside to a quiet place for a moment. Right, so all these strategies—I think you said pray as a prayer. Was that one of the strategies I heard? Right.

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So people have, yeah, so people have lots of different strategies, from taking some time to think by stepping away, breathing, counting to ten as a way of creating that space, using prayer or some mindful activity. Um, some people like to exercise as a way to calm down or go into the woods—we heard that earlier. And these are both short-term, like very short-term. In less than a minute, you can take a few deep breaths and go grab a glass of water.

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Or if it's something you need a few hours to calm down, um, then that's going into the woods or getting a workout, or, um, taking a good long bath, or praying, or meditating. So those are great strategies. Yeah, another person says, "Allow myself to freak out first and then figure out what the next step is." That's lovely. So you can freak out in the privacy of your own space, and then you've done your freaking out, and then you can pause, and then you can go back to whoever it is, um, you need to interact with.

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Lovely. Absolutely lovely. So we're thinking about, um, we're thinking about you right now. We were thinking about you, and I want to extend that, because, um, parents are their children's best teachers.

And, um, like we said earlier, we need to put our own masks on before assisting others. And that also sort of relates to the fact that we bring children into the world, and we bring—we literally talk about bringing children up. Um, and so I want you just to think a little bit—and you don't need to write this in the chat—but I want you to think a bit, and we can certainly discuss this, um, later on when we have time for Q&A.

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How does your family, as a family, deal with big emotions? What is your family's emotional style? What did you learn about emotions growing up? Um, so think about your own family of origin and the messages that you got. And we'll talk a little bit about how we learn about emotions as children. But when you think about your current family, you can't ignore what—how you learned about emotions, and, um, whether it's intentional or not. And in most families, um, how we deal with big emotions is not intentional.

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You know, we don't learn about emotions in school—or we do now more than we used to. Now there are social and emotional learning curricula, but there used to be none. And mostly we learn by doing and seeing. Um, and so this provides an opportunity for you to think about the emotions that you feel comfortable sharing with your children, and maybe the emotions that you don't feel comfortable sharing with your children.

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And the way we think about emotions—it's really fascinating—because the way we express emotions on our face is fairly universal, but the way we think about emotions and the way we consider what is appropriate to express is highly cultural. And when I say cultural, I mean cultural in the broadest and the narrowest sense of the word. That, um, cultural in terms of our society, but also cultural in terms of our family culture, maybe our religion, um, as well as our ethnicity, our nationality, our—you know, things like that.

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Um, you know, certainly when we think about Eastern cultures compared with Western cultures, we know that emotional expression is, um, considered very differently. Um, so take a little bit of time to think about that, um, because we want to start with parents, um, but we also want to talk a little bit about children today. So parents are their kids' best teachers. Um, and so I want to spend a little bit of time talking about nature and nurture—that is, what we're born with and what we learn in our family.

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And the dance that parents and children learn to do together when children come into the world and parents get that, I think, hardest job in the world of being a parent and bringing up a child. Um, so, um, children understand the world very differently to us adults. And of course, the way children understand the world differs based on their development.

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So I didn't ask you, um, earlier, but I would love to ask you—this is my, I promise, this is my last ask for the Q&A—um, how old are your children? What's the age range of the children that you, um, are with

most? Well, the children who are most relevant to you—how old are those children? Um, and—and this I’m going to hold for later. So I’m not going to ask, but I’m just going to ask you to think about it.

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What are the things those children in your life worry about the most? So, um, so how old are your kids, and what are the kinds of things that your kids worry about? Um, and, Chih-Ching, I don’t know if people have written ages in, but we can certainly hear—right, age 13. So we know we have some teenagers. Yes, I’m guessing we—I’m going to guess that we might have a range of ages. Certainly, if we have teenagers, um—ah, okay, okay. So I think if there’s a tendency towards the older ages, I’m going to give some teen examples. Um, if you see—23, 16, 14, 16. Okay, good. All right. So we’re looking at—yeah, teens. This is great. So I’m going to give some teen examples and maybe some preteen examples.

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But let’s talk a little bit about how kids understand the world. One of the things we know is that, um, you know, development is this absolutely remarkable thing. Um, and children develop in multiple domains. So the brain develops. They develop motor skills, language skills, and cognitive skills. They develop emotional understanding. They develop social skills. Children develop in multiple domains, and they don’t necessarily develop uniformly in every domain.

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Because you’re sophisticated intellectually—for example, if you have a very, um, um, sort of very bright child—that doesn’t mean that they’re very bright; you know, they’re sort of remarkable in social or emotional learning as well. Kids—you can have children who are socially so skilled it’s quite a remarkable gift. That doesn’t translate to sort of cognitive capacities. And I think that’s a very special thing, because it means that children can excel. You know, children will find their place in multiple domains. And so, for example, often parents will say to me, “My child is, um, really extraordinarily intelligent, and I want to skip a grade.” Um, this is one of my favorite examples. Um, your child really might be reading well ahead of the rest of his or her classmates, or doing math problems that children two years older are doing. But your child socially might be just at the right level, or emotionally just at the right level. And when we think about moving children to different classes, or, you know, we want to be thinking globally about them, not just about them in one domain.

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But if we think about domains, let’s think a little bit about emotional development. And what we know is that, um, children develop anxieties at different ages. And in fact, um, many of you have had—if you have teenagers, then you’ve had babies. And, um, we see anxiety, um, uh, sort of peaks twice in the first year of life with stranger anxiety.

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When babies who have been so happy to be passed around from friend to friend, or parent to parent, and will pretty much go to anyone, suddenly become terrified of strangers. And that’s evolutionarily a very wise thing. Um, but you see it very suddenly sometimes in very young children under the age of one. Similarly, um, children develop something called separation anxiety as a normative part of development. Where they, um, suddenly really have a hard time being separated from their primary

caregiver, um, whether it's just Mom goes out and leaves the child with a babysitter, or the child goes to daycare for the first time.

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But separation anxiety, again, evolutionarily, makes a lot of sense. And, um, those are sort of key anxieties in very young children. And then anxiety—general anxiety—is pretty, um, you can see it quite significantly often in school-age children. So we think maybe sort of a peak, um, of what we call normal, typical anxiety might happen when a child is an elementary-age kid. And, um, I love thinking about that because I think, um, it makes so much sense for a child of, say, nine or ten to be old enough to be able to read the news and hear the news.

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And, uh, um, realize that there's a really big and sometimes scary world out there, but they're not quite old enough to be able to do anything about it. Um, of course, as children become teenagers, they have more agency. They have more control. Um, that doesn't necessarily translate into great decisions being made. Um, the phase of life that is adolescence is second only to the early years—the first two years—in terms of the rapidity of brain development. It's quite a remarkable time. And there are some really unique things that happen in adolescence, um, both in the brain and in behavior, that we can certainly talk about in the Q&A.

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Um, but I want you to think about development and anxiety both in terms of what we sort of normatively know, but also, like, how anxiety develops, but also in terms of the character of your child or children. And so that's where we talk about temperament. And, um, what we know is that temperament is a remarkably stable thing. That kids who are born, um, with easy temperaments—you know, giggly and just, um, sort of happy-go-lucky and easy to adapt to new things—are children, you know, that's pretty—that temperament can be quite stable. Um, and, um, on the other hand, children who are very highly sensitive in early childhood, who, who—you know, I use my own son as an example, who is now 30.

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And, um, as a child, I was a very highly sensitive child. And we didn't really have that label then. Um, but as an adult, I realize that I am very sensitive to noises and to smells and, um, and, you know, sort of the itchiness of clothing and, um, things like that. You have children who love nothing better than a big, loud, noisy party, and you have other children who really would rather stay on the edge and just look and see and go very slowly and have some preparation for a new thing happening. Um, so researchers have come up with this really interesting characterization of kids as flowers, which I love.

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And I just want to say that, um, those who sort of developed that idea—we call it differential susceptibility—developed by a man called Jay Belsky and other colleagues. Um, that this isn't, you know, set in stone, and these questions are still being asked. Research is very much underway. But, um, I love sort of thinking about children as orchids or dandelions or tulips.

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And so if any of you have had an orchid—I have had several orchids—and, um, after the orchid comes to my home, um, however hard I try, that orchid never flowers again. I'm just not good enough at looking after orchids. Um, but when you are a person who, um, who loves orchids and knows how to treat those orchids in a way. What you will see are the most beautiful flowers. And if you're, uh, that gifted person and you have an orchidarium, I can only imagine how beautiful it will be. And so the orchid child is what we might call a highly sensitive child who, um, under really good nurturing conditions can just really blossom beautifully.

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But under harder conditions, it might not do so well compared to a dandelion. And I don't know how many of you—I don't know where you all live and whether you have dandelions—but I'm from England, and dandelions grow everywhere. And they are beautiful bright yellow flowers, and they literally grow between the cracks in the pavement. They will grow anywhere. They are hardy, um, and they are tough.

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And I love the yellow. Um, and that's another kind of child. That's your easygoing, happy-go-lucky, anything-goes, adaptable child. Um, and then, you know, we think about tulips. I think that was a later addition. And tulips are, um, um, they're lovely, pretty flowers. Um, and probably they represent most children—not the highly sensitive, not the extremely happy-go-lucky—but most of our kids in the middle, who needs some good nurturing. Um, you don't have to be the best parent in the world. You can be just good enough. Um, uh, you can be just a good-enough parent, and your child will do just fine.

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But the reason I sort of mention this—and this is, you can tell, this is my favorite part of this—is because, um, we all have to learn how to dance with our children when we have them. And sometimes it takes us longer than others, and sometimes with some children it takes us longer to learn the dance than with other children. And so what I think—what I want you to think about—is how you dance with your child. Whether your child is 23 or 11 or even five or two, how do you dance with your child?

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Because your way of dancing might be different from your child's way of dancing. And so watching their steps is a part of learning how to dance with your child. So I'm really aware of the time, and I know there's never enough time. So, um, I want to move on to talk a little bit about children and emotions. And I really want to encourage you, um, to sort of think of those questions and put those questions in the chat for later, for, um, you know, when we—when I finish the presentation and we have a chance to sort of talk about this in practice.

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So all we know is that children learn about emotions in three ways. Um, they watch us, their parents, deal with our own big emotions. When I get, um, sad or angry or embarrassed and I go and I'm in my home, my children watch me very carefully, because that teaches them how they should be dealing with emotions. They also learn about emotions by the way their parents respond. So if I'm a mom and my little boy comes into the house crying because he's been bullied on the bus on the way home from school, and I say, "Stop crying. Big boys don't cry," I am sending him a very clear message about what

emotions are acceptable and what emotions aren't. What I'm saying to him is crying is not acceptable, certainly not if you're a boy. Um, and that may be an intended or unintended message. And I think often our messages to our children are unintended, but that conveys a message.

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Another response to my child's crying might be, um, "There, there. Oh, you're home. No need to cry. Stop crying. I'll get you a cookie, a biscuit." "We'll sit down, we'll have a nice cup of tea and a cookie, and you can stop crying now." And that conveys a different kind of message. It doesn't say crying is bad, don't ever cry in my presence. But it says, well, crying is not really useful. Just stop crying, have a cookie instead, and drink water. I might also say to my child instead—another way to respond to my child might be, "Wow, you look really upset." "I can see that you're crying. I can see that you're sad. Tell me—tell me how you're feeling. Tell me how you're feeling in your body." "I'm so mad and sad and embarrassed, Mom, because those big kids—they grabbed my book that I was reading and they threw it around the bus."

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"And, um—" and we will continue from there. And that's a different kind of response to emotions. And that response is, um, I'm interested in what you're feeling first. I want to make sure that I understand what you're feeling by checking in with how you feel, what you tell me, where you feel it. And then I want to hear your story and what happened. And we'll talk more about the story later. But we do have a lot of research now—about 30 or 40 years—that shows that how parents respond to and teach their children about big emotions does affect how kids then deal with emotions later. I didn't talk about the third way that kids learn about emotions, which is by talking about them. We don't often sit around the dinner table and say, "How are you feeling? Let's talk about you feeling happy or you feeling sad." We tend to talk about things. We don't tend to talk about feelings. Um, but that is a way that kids learn about emotions—by us just sitting down and talking about it.

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Um, so what we know in terms of the way parents respond to their children's emotions, or the way parents teach or socialize their children's emotions, is that a lot of punishing emotions, or dismissing emotions, or invalidating children's emotions. A lot of messages like, "That's a bad thing to feel," "Don't ever come to me crying," "Stop that," "You need to put on a brave face," "Never, never show that you're scared". Um, those kinds of what we would call, um, emotion-dismissing or negative emotion socialization can really teach children that those emotions are to be stuffed away and suppressed. And, um, and it could be that that leads to sort of more emotional suppression.

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And that could increase children's later, um, likelihood of anxiety and depression. And I'm not saying this leads to this in all cases, by any means. I'm a researcher, and we researchers say this just might increase the risk for this. Um, but we know that—and I want to focus more on this—coaching and teaching children about emotions can protect us. So that's one thing that we know, that if you can help children learn about navigating—

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Cue into what they're feeling—that can really help kids. And essentially what we're talking about—let's

talk about fear as an example—is fear is really important evolutionarily, right? Fear stops us from being eaten by lions, and it stops us from walking across the road when there’s a lot of traffic. Um, it—it—it gets the adrenaline going. Someone talked about cortisol. It—it moves us. Um, and it’s—it’s really important. So it’s important for us to detect when we feel fear or worry or—or positive feelings too, because once we know what we’re feeling, and once we can help our kids know what they’re feeling, then we can choose what to do with it.

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So that’s why emotion coaching is—is—is so important. I’m going to really go through this very quickly, because I think we talked about this earlier. But, um, this sort of idea of pause, breathe, notice, I think is a very, um, easy way to, um, to just—to—to identify what you’re feeling and help your child identify what they’re feeling. Which is sort of, when something happens, instead of responding—reacting—immediately, always taking a pause, whether it’s a breath, a count to ten, a grab a glass of water, feel your feet in your shoes.

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Taking a pause and a breath allows you to notice what you are feeling and what you are thinking. And then it allows you—and not your feelings—to be in control. Otherwise, we can be flooded by feelings, overwhelmed—we often talk about that—and then they control us, and we are not, um, intentional. Because we can’t be, because our feelings have overwhelmed us. It sounds easy to say. It is really hard to do. It’s really hard to do. The more overwhelmed we are, the worse it is. The harder things are, the harder it is to regulate our emotions, which is what we’ve been talking about. But that is really the first step to emotion coaching: helping children to label and identify what they’re feeling.

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And so, you know, your teenager might come in—I promised I’d give a teen example—and, uh, be really upset because they haven’t been invited to a party. And, um, you might not know that. You might just know that your child might have come in late. Your 15-year-old or your 13-year-old comes into the house, slams the door, and then you hear thump, thump, thump upstairs, and another door slam. And they’re in their room, and they play their music loudly. And you’re sort of—how are you feeling? You know, all of us will have different responses to that.

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I’ve had four teenagers. Thankfully, none of them are teenagers anymore, although I guess my 21-year-old might be considered a teenager. But technically, by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which defines adolescence as lasting, I think, until the age of 26—um, or 24. But if my child comes in and slams the door, I might—I might be angry, because I’ve told them, “Please close the door carefully,” because when you slam the door, it ruins the door. Um, I might be upset that they didn’t come in and say hello. Um, I might feel offended. Um, I might just be distracted and impatient. Um, but I might take—I think I would be wise to take a couple of minutes to take a breath and then make a decision about what to do.

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I might, depending on what type of mom I am, tentatively knock on the door and open the door and say something like, “Wow, it sounds like you might have had a hard day.” Um, or I might give them some space and wait till they come down for a snack, or offer a snack, or something like that. Um, but then I

have the opportunity to say, you know, “That door slam really told me that something hard might have happened, and I wonder how you’re feeling.”

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And some kids will tell you, and other kids won’t. It might take a little bit more. And I would never push it—never, ever, ever push it. Um, can wait till dinner, and maybe they’ll be ready to tell you when they’re ready. Um, but the idea of helping them label and identify their emotions allows them to sort of reflect on what they’re feeling. And it could be you reflecting on the look on their face, or the tears, or the—the—the actions.

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And then if they tell you what they—um—what happened, like, “Yeah, my friend, um, you know, I thought she was my friend, and she didn’t invite me to her party.” “And I invited her to my party, and all my friends are going, and I’m not invited. I’m so embarrassed. I’m so ashamed. I’m so angry, and I’m really upset about it. I’m really sad about it.” And you often—um—parents, we think, “Oh, that’s such a small problem compared to the problems of the world.” Um, but actually, um, that’s not what our kid needs to hear. We want to validate what our child is feeling.

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So, “That must really stink. I remember when I was young, and, um, it wasn’t the same situation as you, but wow, I was so upset when I was excluded.” And actually, you know—and—and—and I—I’m talking about pretty normative examples.

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But, um, you know, kids being bullied, or children, um—especially on social media—we know this is very prevalent with children. Um, finding ways to validate what they’re feeling is so important. So it might be, “Yeah, um, that’s awful what happened on social media.” “And if that happened to me, I would feel just like you’re feeling now.” “And, you know, there wasn’t any social media when I was your age, but if there were—wow—I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

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“That must feel just terrible.” So that’s a sort of validation—listening to kids, right? And just taking the time to listen. You know, we often think we know what kids are going to say, um, but we don’t. And we find out new things if we give them the opportunity to listen. Instead of, “Why did you slam the door and go up to your room? And put that music down. The volume is way too high.” Um, and then we’re not going to hear what happened. Um, and then the final stage of emotion coaching is what to do about it. And so, um, what we—what we’re doing here is—and, you know, I might—I might take the bullying example.

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Um, we validated our child’s feelings of really being, let’s say, excluded or victimized. We’ve heard what they’ve said, and it’s pretty worrying to us as well. We’ve noted that. We’ve kind of taken our own deep breath so we can really be available to our children. And now we want to—we want to not stop there with the listening and the empathy. We want to make sure we take the time to listen and empathize and validate. But we also want to help our child come to a resolution.

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And that might be, “I hear that you feel so mortified about what happened, and you feel like the whole class is seeing those really embarrassing messages from social media.” “Things that maybe you texted to your boyfriend, thinking that it was private, and now he’s shared all those texts with other people.” “And I know that you’re telling me that you don’t want to go to school tomorrow, which tells me that you’re pretty anxious about school.” “So let’s think together about how we can help you go back to school and reduce your anxiety.” “And let’s also problem-solve how we can deal with what happened on social media and with the actual bullying incident.”

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So inherent in this is also a limit-setting, which is, of course, the implicit message here: your school is not an option. Um, we have—you have to go to school. You know, that’s required. Within those limits, let’s talk together. And the beautiful thing about the problem-solving process, however old your child is—whether they’re three, 13, or 18—is that you have an opportunity to do a collaborative problem-solving process. So you might say to your 13-year-old, like, “Let’s think about ways that you can feel less anxious.” And your 13-year-old might say, “Yeah, I’m not going to school tomorrow.” And you’ll say, “Well, I’m going to write it down, because all ideas are good ideas.” So you write it down. And then your idea might be, like, “Let’s go check in with the homeroom teacher, or the principal, or the assistant principal before school tomorrow.”

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“I’m going to send them an urgent message so we can meet.” Or, um, “Maybe I could take you into school.” And your child might say, “Make the principal expel the other kids.” Um, you say you’re writing it down because all ideas are good ideas. And then you go through the ideas, and that’s when you weigh them up. And you say, “Okay, do you think I have the power to get the principal to expel the children?” “Even if we decided that would be a good idea—probably not.” “So we’ll have to—we’ll have to do that one.” Um, or maybe we’ll—we’ll—we’ll create some compromises. “You know, you don’t want to go to school tomorrow. Um, we have to go to school, but I could take you in just for tomorrow.” Or, um, “We—we definitely can’t make the principal expel anyone, but we could ask the principal how we could resolve the issue between you and the bullies.”

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So that’s the idea around the last phase of emotion coaching. Um, and—and this really is an emotion coaching conversation. And, um, I—you know, in my book I talk a lot about these, and I give a lot of examples of emotion coaching conversations. And there are some basics, and there are some things to think about if you have the opportunity to plan a conversation.

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So if it’s a serious issue and your child is too upset to talk, or you need some space, or you need to find some information out about what happened before you have the conversation—it’s—it’s fantastic to prepare for the conversations. And sometimes you can’t. They’re spontaneous conversations. But here are some ideas about the sort of things that you might want to know first. Um, and hopefully they’ll tell you. And you want to think about your own feelings. That’s very important. So you can sort of put them aside to be with your child.

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And, of course, my caveat is that we're living in a very uncertain, rapidly changing, easy-to-feel-helpless-in world. Where there's so much that's hearsay, and it's so hard—especially on social media—to sift fact from fiction. Um, I want to make sure—I know we only have, like, nine minutes—so I want to just briefly sort of talk about—

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We've sort of talked about this. I want to just encourage you to think, if there are two of you—two parents—how great is that, that you can sometimes share the conversation and figure out who will lead it. Um, and I think, sort of, we covered some of the other issues. And I just want to end with this sort of idea. When I was writing my book, um, I did some research to find out how often parents and children have conversations every day. And I was absolutely shocked and horrified to find out that the average amount of time parents report spending talking with or listening to their children on a daily basis—

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On average, not including all the other stuff we do—dressing them, getting them ready for school, driving them places—the average amount of time across the population is three minutes. That is right—three minutes. And that's where I got this idea for "Take 10." Take ten minutes—just ten minutes—every day to have a conversation with your child. It doesn't have to be a profound conversation. It shouldn't be a forced conversation. Follow your child's lead.

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If they don't want to talk, model conversations between you and an adult partner. Um, but the more you get used to having conversations, the easier they are going to be when they are hard conversations. And you can have them while you're having dinner, or in the car, or walking the dog. So I want to stop there and just say thank you so much. Um, I hope—well, I know—we'll have lots of questions. So let's hear—let's hear the questions.

[00:50:32]

CHIH-CHING HU: Thank you, Abby, um, for your wonderful presentation. So now we are open up to a Q&A session.

[00:50:42]

Uh, first question—actually, pretty long question, uh, pretty long description. Uh, let me read it. "My 10-year-old missed two days of school in the first week of school due to vomiting. He was fine at home on Sunday. He said he didn't want to go to school just in case there's a school shooting. I wrote to his teacher and asked for resources. My son then just said it's a joke, and he's fine. He was upset that I shared it with his teacher. Monday morning, he said he was not feeling well, and his tummy hurt. He missed the school bus. We were able to drive him into school. So how do we deal with it?"

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DR. ABIGAIL GEWIRTZ: Yeah, I—that's such a relevant question. Thank you so much for raising that. And, um, it's not surprising given recent events in Georgia, given our unfortunate history, um, in the United States of school shootings. That, um—and the fact that now in many schools they have drills, lockdown drills—the children will be scared. Um, the reality, of course, is that school is an extremely safe place for

children, likely one of the safest places, if not the safest place, for children to be. But it doesn't matter, because as soon as something hits the news, it's as if it happens in your town. I think that's something to bear in mind. But I want to say that you did absolutely the right thing by taking your child to school.

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Because what we know about anxiety—and I think Wendy Silverman is going to—I'm going to give Wendy a plug for the next talk. Because I think she's going to talk more about, um, when anxiety really becomes a problem, and it really can be hard for children to function. But, um, what we know about anxiety is that when, um, when you don't have to do the thing that you most fear, then the relief that you feel is so rewarding that you don't want to do it even more next time.

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So had you told your child, "You missed the school bus, you can stay at home," then you can bet your bottom dollar that the next day would have been even harder to help your child get to school. Now, that doesn't mean to say that we should sort of laugh—never—we should never say, "Oh, don't be silly." This isn't—I mean, we've just been talking about emotion coaching. Helping our children slowly, um, figure out a plan to deal with their anxiety is really, really important. And so these conversations that we've been talking about are ways to sort of get started. I really want to savor—um—why I think this is a nice segue. So going to talk about, you know, typical conversations, typical homes, when anxiety doesn't get out of control. And when I say out of control, it doesn't stop your child from leading his normal life.

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Your child can be anxious, but he's not having, you know, crawling into your bed every single night or refusing to go to school for days. That Wendy—Wendy Silverman's going to talk about that next time. But what we're talking about is really helping children deal with their anxiety by being able to recognize it. So in the case that you described, "I feel really scared because I am scared of school shootings, and I think there's going to be a shooting in my school, and I don't want to go to school because of that." So that's great. So let's take some time to think about—to help your child with their anxiety—to validate their anxiety, to listen to their fears. And then to spend some time problem-solving: how can we help you feel calm, and how can we help you sort of resolve your fear? And that will involve all sorts of things, like facts—some facts.

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Schools are very safe places. Some really get help from school personnel, so that your child is convinced that your school is a safe school. You're never going to promise your child anything. But knowing what the procedures are, and knowing what everyone knows, and knowing how unlikely it is—that's some help. And, of course, the calming, the emotional regulation, and helping children. Maybe by—if they're scared to start school, and you know ahead of time—taking them to the schoolyard before school starts. Taking them to meet the teacher. Um, so gradually working their way through the fears. Sorry, I took a long time in answering that.

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CHIH-CHING HU: That's okay. Good, thank you. So next question: What kind of language is best to use for children when they do not wish to talk due to stress?

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DR. ABIGAIL GEWIRTZ: Yeah, that's a really great, um, really great question. Um, use—um—use—use language yourself. So talk about feelings yourself. Say, "I feel—um—my boss was not happy with me today, and I felt really anxious." "My palms got sweaty, and I could feel my heart pounding." "And I wonder if you feel like that."

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You could be sitting around the dinner table. You might turn to Dad. I might turn to Dad and say, "Dad, how do you feel?" And Dad might say, "You know, I—I was reading the news, and it was really—the news made me anxious." "And I could feel it—I felt my neck and my back tense." And so what you're doing is you're modeling. And the more you model, the more likely your children are to be able to, um, to understand and to talk about things themselves.

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CHIH-CHING HU: Abby, do you mind stopping screen sharing so we can see you?

[00:56:36]

DR. ABIGAIL GEWIRTZ: Of course. I just want to point out, um, that we have—um—we have some good webinar series that we do at ASU. They're totally free. They're called "I Don't Know," and they're just for parents. Um, and so I'm happy—I mean, we'll share it. When you share the slides, people can just log on and see other webinars about things that make kids and parents anxious.

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CHIH-CHING HU: Oh, that's great. And we can distribute that information. You can send it to us. We will do that. So, next question about emotion regulation: What would you do when a 15-year-old teenager yells loudly because the video game is playing—it's frustrating?

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DR. ABIGAIL GEWIRTZ: Queue into what they're feeling. That can really help kids. Essentially, what we're talking about—let's talk about fear as an example—is that fear is really important evolutionarily, right? Fear stops us from being eaten by lions, and it stops us from walking across the road when there's a lot of traffic. It gets the adrenaline going. Someone talked about cortisol. It moves us, and it's really important. So it's important for us to detect when we feel fear or worry, or positive feelings too, because once we know what we're feeling, and once we can help our kids know what they're feeling, then we can choose what to do with it. That's why emotion coaching is so important. I'm going to go through this very quickly, because I think we talked about this earlier, but this idea of pause, breathe, notice is a very easy way to identify what you're feeling and help your child identify what they're feeling.

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CHIH-CHING HU: Thank you so much, Abby. It's time to conclude.

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DR. ABIGAIL GEWIRTZ: Thank you. It was my pleasure.

[00:59:05]

CHIH-CHING HU: Thank you everyone for joining us. Our next webinar will be on September 24th with

Dr. Wendy Silverman. This webinar is being recorded and will be available in one to two weeks. Please complete the survey and consider donating. With that, we're closing the webinar. Thank you, and take care.