



# ELMHURST COUNSELING

## Self-regulation Challenges with School-age Children *Integrating home, school, and professional resources*

At younger and younger ages, kids are struggling with anxiety and self-regulation. Today's parenting approach (accommodating kids to reduce stress and discomfort) makes it harder for kids to learn coping skills. Anxiety is not something to be prevented – it is our universal and necessary response to stress. Yet, our instinct is to insulate our children from distress and discomfort entirely. Kids who don't learn to cope with distress face a rough path through childhood. We have either a parent-child vicious cycle or a parent-child virtuous cycle:

**Vicious Cycle:** Adult stress leads to child stress, which leads to more adult stress, which leads to...

**Virtuous Cycle:** As parents reduce accommodating approaches to anxiety, kids will start coping for themselves. As they cope, they feel more capable, and will be treated as such by their parents, who feel less stressed and further reduce accommodation.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is most empirically supported therapy for anxiety. CBT combines “cognitive restructuring” (challenging maladaptive beliefs) with exposure to the sources of anxiety. The goal is to desensitize you to stress and provide tools for enduring discomfort rather than avoiding it.

However, CBT tends to focus on the child at the expense of weighing the impact of the parents' responses to anxiety. There is research establishing a *correlation* between children's anxiety and parents' behavior. Accommodation has become a focus of anxiety research. Well-intentioned efforts we make to reduce kids' distress doesn't help them manage it in the long run.

*Despite more than a decade's evidence that helicopter parenting is counterproductive, kids today are perhaps more overprotected, more leery of adulthood, more in need of therapy. Modern parents, or at least the upper-middle-class ones who populate most articles about parenting trends, are widely perceived not as flailing but as the opposite: too hyper, too competent, too vigilant. And yet, despite more than a decade's evidence that helicopter parenting is counterproductive. If we learn to tolerate our children's discomfort, we can stop getting in the way of their efforts to cope with it. If we want to create the conditions for children's mental health, we must first create the conditions for adult sanity, in the form of more support for families.*

*-Kate Julian  
What Happened to American Childhood (2020)*

Anxiety is contagious - especially from adult to child. Recognizing the relationship between parental and child anxiety supports both *prevention* (activating the virtuous cycle) and *intervention* (addressing acute situations). As an alternative to accommodation, the goal is to express empathy for their child's distress along with confidence in their ability to manage it.

### Key principles of an integrated approach:

1. Take care of the people who take care of the kids (parents, caregivers, teachers, clinicians).
2. Model effective self-regulation (versus accommodation) during periods of distress.
3. Normalize healthy exposure to anxiety and teach self-soothing coping skills at developmentally tailored levels (e.g., biofeedback)
4. Express empathy for discomfort and confidence in the child's ability to manage it.
5. Coordinate and synchronize home, school, and professional approaches

*“Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing. To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable.”*

*Helen Keller Let Us Have Faith (1940)*