

## Fear and Anxiety in the First Seven Years of Life – On the effects of feelings between parent and child

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*A child is taken by her parents to be vaccinated. She does not yet know what is happening. She has never had a shot or blood drawn before. She is already crying on her mother's arm when the doctor enters the room. When the child moves to her father, there is only a brief improvement - she wants to go back to her mother. In the course of the conversation, it turns out that the mother strictly objects to vaccination and has a syringe phobia.*

Children live in a strong emotional bond with their parents. This is an important basis for healthy development, but in unfortunate cases, it can also be the cause of deep grievances. Love, warmth, and joy have a nourishing effect on the young child.

The child feels well in such surroundings, right into the physical condition, appetite, and digestion. On the other hand, mental illness, excessive negative emotions, or stress have a burdening and illness-inducing effect on the child's body. If depression, fear, pain, and despair persist in the souls of the parents, they inscribe themselves deeply into the body of the unborn child through the mother. And such a state of mind also has a weakening, unsettling, and ultimately grievous effect on the little child. Emotional support, accompaniment, and therapy for the parents, therefore, have a healing and developmental effect on the child.

It does not have to be a manifest (mental) illness that has an effect and becomes visible in the parent-child relationship. All parents experience forms of stress, excessive demands, fear, anger, sadness, or dejection. And the more openly one can admit to being overwhelmed by such feelings, the more confidently one can extricate oneself from them and seek help. Often, all it takes is a good talk, for example with a friend, one's significant other, or the family doctor.

- Characterizing fear and anxiety

Etymology: "Angst" (anxiety) comes from the Middle High German "Angust", constriction, distress. In contrast to fear, which refers to a real situation and serves as self-protection, anxiety can also be completely unrelated to reality. Experiencing fear or awe is an appropriate part of life and even helps us again and again to survive again. Living in a state of anxiety, on the other hand, is characterized by overwhelm and powerlessness and can lead to an inability to act.

- Trauma and the Corona Crisis

Many psychologists and psychiatrists speak of traumatic experiences or even global trauma in connection with the Corona pandemic. The massiveness in which fear is generated and reinforced with images and numbers makes this use of the term understandable. Hardly anyone will be able to remain completely free of uncertainty, stress, worry, and existential concerns. Bernd Ruf, who has observed forms of traumatization around the world and in a wide variety of circumstances, describes trauma at its core as a "soul wound." Since the beginning of the pandemic, he has called for greater protection of children and children and has warned of the psychological consequences for the most vulnerable group in our society.

Often, we don't find a reason for children's anxiety or fearfulness. Sometimes we simply have the feeling that they already bring something with them that makes them appear deeply insecure. But



the sharp increase in anxiety among children and adolescents in the last two years must be seen in the context of global insecurity. Acknowledging this is the first step on the way out of the mental health crisis and at the same time an effective contribution to the fight against the psycho-neuro-immunological pandemic.

- Symptoms of anxiety in young children

The phenomena of anxiety are characterized by shifts in the entire structure of the human being. The first to be touched is feeling, the soul. The soul is strengthened, chaotized, intensified, and, due to its close connection with the life body, has a direct effect on bodily processes. The life forces are weakened and get out of their healthy rhythm and structure. Due to the close relationship with the parents, the child often first seeks the closeness and protection of the closest caregiver, both in fear of a specific trigger and in vague anxiety. Physicians regularly experience in their consultation hours that a shy or fearful child initially spends some time on the lap of the mother or father until he or she has gained confidence in the new situation and gradually increases his or her radius in the room. As in the example described at the beginning, however, it is not necessarily its own anxiety that the child feels and expresses. In cases of difficulty in falling asleep as well, it can be an unresolved fear in the parent that does not allow the child to come to rest.

Since the young child's psychological state is still completely connected to physiological processes, a wide variety of physical symptoms can be indications of anxiety. These include changes in breathing, hyperventilation, shortness of breath, racing heart, increase in blood pressure, becoming pale, sweating, abdominal pain, urination, wetting, nausea, and diarrhea. "Peeing one's pants in fear" happens to young children even on minor occasions more than later, when the soul no longer intervenes so directly in physiology. In the case of loss of voice or speech (mutism), it is imperative to think of trauma and seek out the cause.

- On an anthroposophical understanding

The reason why, in the close relationship between parents and child, adults' anxiety does not simply cause anxiety in the child, but more often intervenes much more deeply in its organization, is described particularly vividly in a passage of Rudolf Steiner's *Curative Education Course* (GA 317, 2nd

lecture). It is explained there how as an educator, one acts from the life level (etheric organization) on the development of the physical body of the child. This requires fine observation over a longer period of time, until one recognizes how one's own strength or weakness reaches into the physical body of the child. A nursing mother has perhaps the most direct experiences in this regard. With our feelings we affect the development of the child's life organization. The fact that we can influence the child's strength, vitality, sleep, and other physiological processes, for example, through a positive, or negative, stressed state of mind, is the easiest for many parents to understand. In this lecture, Rudolf Steiner develops this principle, which he calls "a pedagogical law," even further: with the ego organization, as an individuality, one works most strongly on the soul, the astral body of the child, and one can even work on the ego of the child, beyond these aspects of our being that are known to us in everyday life, through something that lives in our higher self. Thus, every educator affects those in his care through every level of his being. Attentiveness to our own selves is therefore significant for the health of our children: How is our strength? Are we affectionate and balanced in our souls? Do we experience in ourselves an upright, secure, and well-oriented personality? And are we working on our spiritual development?

- Countering Anxiety

Anything that generates warmth in body, mind, and spirit has the effect of countering anxiety. If you are unsure whether you are doing the right thing to avoid fear or counteract anxiety, it helps to ask yourself if you can establish a relationship with warmth. If so, everything will be all right! "Fight or flight" are the reflexive reactions to something that frightens you. In a positive sense, therefore, the ability to act and distance oneself also help. If an adult authority shows you how to cover the spider with a glass and then carry it on a postcard into the garden to a place where it likes to stay (after you have perhaps briefly admired how beautiful it actually is), then from now on you can always do this on your own and no longer need to lose your composure. And when there are beings, invisible to us as adults, which prevent the child from falling asleep, we should acknowledge and speak to these beings and send them to their place. Humorous distraction is also a wonderful remedy against anxiety for young children. The imagination, which is often particularly strong in anxious children, can be filled with beautiful, light-filled images and stories. When a new-born's protective reflex, such as the Moro reflex, remains active, the child experiences small startle reactions that he is not aware of, but which cause him continued stress and often manifest themselves in anxiety. He is often afraid of animals or other children since quick movements visually trigger the reflex.

Loud noises can also elicit such a reaction. A good treatment here, for example, would be reflex integration through therapeutic eurythmy exercises.

The sense of touch is insufficiently developed in many children today. It often conveys little support and protection and, instead, a sense of instability, insecurity, and fear. The care of all senses, especially the sense of touch, is the basis of the treatment of anxious children. Swaddling a restless infant is anxiety prevention. What all do we feel through the sense of touch? We feel how we intensely sense the world and experience ourselves in it. We feel secure and embraced within safe boundaries. We are extended a hand and feel support. Especially when barefoot, one feels that one has ground under one's feet. Through touching, one experiences the most substantial confirmation of one's own existence.

The feeling of being safe in one's own skin can be wonderfully supported with external applications. Here, one can be guided by the symptoms of the children. For example, a warm oxalis compress can



help with stomachache or after a shock, and a warm eucalyptus oil wrap can help with a nervous bladder. If something "got to the kidneys" of the child, a morning copper ointment rub can strengthen the kidney function, while in the evening, warm feet can prevent nocturnal enuresis. A yarrow liver compress also helps to digest overpowering emotions and at the same time strengthens the vital forces. A relaxing warm oil bath or a lavender-scented Solumöl® rub promotes the feeling of well-being in one's own body. The life forces as a source of resistance to an intense, highly sensitive or frightened emotional life are strengthened by everything that supports the daily rhythm. Taking good care of sleep, as the little brother of death, is very strengthening. Falling asleep with trust in the spiritual world after a beautiful prayer or verse and waking up refreshed and fresh at the usual time gives strength not only to children. This is not an innate capacity; it must first be learned, even by infants.

On the soul level, trust is nourished by reliability in everyday life. Being able to rely on the fact that familiar rituals always take place at the same time and in the same place is not boring, it builds trust.

And if something frightening and scary does happen, the salutogenetic skills of the adults are particularly important in conveying security to the child: If children experience us as capable of action, meaningful and understandable, even the darkest things do not shock and frighten them so much.

As parents, strengthening ourselves mentally and spiritually means, in the sense of the Curative Education Course, orientation, support, and protection for the child right into its bodily structure. Experiencing the adult's connection to the spiritual world in the sense of effective meditation and true religiosity offers help for the child in connecting to the body and earth life.

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