

Anxiety Q and A with Dr. Laura Markham

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:00:00](#) Hello, this is Dr. Laura Markham. In this audio, I'll be answering some of the most common questions that parents ask about helping their children manage anxiety. Remember, we're always applying our three big ideas. We start by regulating our own emotions and behavior, then we connect with our child. Finally, instead of trying to control our child, we coach them to be their best self, both by helping them with their emotions and by creating an environment where the child can thrive. So let's see how to apply these three big ideas to daily life with children.

General Thoughts on Anxiety

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:00:41](#) You know I always get a lot of questions from people whose kids have anxiety issues. There is an epidemic of anxiety in the United States, and really the “civilized” world, but especially in the United States, I think. 10 to 20% of kids in the US suffer from anxiety, and I think parents are more likely to take this course if their kids are challenging, obviously. They're challenging because they're angry or anxious, so it makes sense to me that we'd get a lot of questions about anxiety.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:01:08](#) I just want to say as a lead-in a few things that help contribute to anxiety, that help cause anxiety that you can address in your life. First, screens always cause anxiety. They've been proven to cause anxiety. If your child has an anxiety issue, they should not have screens in their lives. I would just say no. Because the dopamine, even if they don't get addicted, the dopamine causes anxiety. So that's important.

If you're anxious as a parent, your anxiety would be picked up by your child. That's very common, almost unavoidable.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:01:40](#) So I would say for your benefit, but also for your child's benefit, you need to be doing some self care around your own anxiety, and that means you need to be doing the things that get rid of anxiety, which means exercise and meditation. They're the two best treatments for anxiety and depression there are. Regular meditation, regular depression, they may not solve everything, but they help enormously. And I think if you're an anxious parent, you can count on transmitting it to your kid unless you do something about it.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:02:14](#) Also, schools cause anxiety. They force kids to be more academic earlier in life and so anything you can do to ease school pressure for your kid is helpful.
- I also think it's simply our stressful 21st century lives. One good resource on this is Kim John Payne. He wrote the book *Simplicity Parenting*. He has a good website and he has a newsletter. It's based on the Waldorf School approach which is very simplicity oriented, very into routines and rhythm, and I think in general they're anti-screen, in general they're into simplicity, and I appreciate that approach.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:02:53](#) Another thing that causes anxiety is not enough time outside. So if your child is not getting time outside, there is a lot of evidence that it makes them more anxious, especially kids with ADHD but really all kids. They just need the fresh air. They need time outside. We don't yet know why, but we know that when they don't get that, it matters.
- And related to that is physical activity, but it's sort of a separate thing because kids can be active inside. But kids need physical activity just like we do to address anxiety. If you have a kid with anxiety, they must be physically active every day.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:03:27](#) And of course they must laugh as much as possible. You've heard me say that about a million times probably. And they must cry regularly, which you've also heard me say, because stuffed emotions increase anxiety. The emotions

are always coming up to get healed, bubbling up, and we have to stop them and it makes us more rigid and anxious. So if you have a kid who tends toward anxiety, they're more anxious if they don't get a chance to laugh and cry and if they feel they have to stuff their feelings.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:03:53](#)

In general, roughhousing of any kind is going to help them because physical activity helps, but laughter is what you want to do most. And when you get kids squealing with laughter, they're usually dancing a little on the edge of their fears. So you put the kid on your back and you careen around the house like you're going to knock them off and you eventually toss them onto the couch. The whole time they're screeching with laughter, they're hopefully not screeching in fear, but they're on the edge there. They're thinking, "Oh my God, is Mommy going to drop me? Is Daddy going to drop me?" So I think it's because they're on the edge of their fear that we're tapping into that fear and we're releasing it from the emotional backpack, and that's probably one of the reasons it's so effective.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:04:36](#)

In general, the approach to take with children who are anxious is this: "It's normal to feel fear, but fear is not always correct. So you notice whether the fear is correct. Like if the fear says, 'Don't go out of the street in front of a moving car,' then the fear is correct. Don't do it. But if the fear says, 'Don't go to that birthday party at your friend's house,' your fear is not correct. Nothing bad is going to happen at the birthday party. And so you feel the fear and you do it anyway. And it's fine to talk to your parents about that and say, "What can I do if I get scared without you there at the party, or if I'm worried about something at the party?"

And it's good to talk to your child about what happens, because your child might think, "Well what if you die and you never come back and get me?" That's one fear. "What if I eat the cake and I choke and I have to throw up and I choke on it, then I die?" It's amazing how many of our kid's fears come back to death. And so if you can get your child to talk to you about what they're actually afraid of, that's great.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:05:37](#) But the point is to say to your child, "That's not going to happen. If it did happen, here's what would happen to help you. You can be brave about this. It's hard to be brave, but you can do it. You can do hard things. Feel the fear and do it anyway." So give your child tools and support and encourage them to do things that scare them, because fear has a way of taking over our lives. If we let it take a small inch, it takes a mile.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:06:03](#) Some good books on anxiety. I love Tamar Chansky's work. She has a book on anxiety and a book on OCD and a book on negative thinking. And Larry Cohen, *The Opposite of Worry*, great book, great guy. I love all his stuff. And here's a book that I've heard really good things about, and it's on my list to read so I haven't read it yet, but I've heard good things about it. It's by Bridget Walker, *Anxiety Relief for Kids: On the spot strategies to help your child overcome worry, panic, and avoidance*. So if you do read it, please let me know if it's good. And then finally a kid's guide to overcoming anxiety, it's called *What To Do When You Worry Too Much* by Dawn Huebner, is a great book for kids. So that's my general wrap on anxiety.

Question 1:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:06:51 The next question is from a parent who says, "Our three-year-old often gets anxious and upset if something happens unexpectedly to her normal routine. For instance, I was dropping her to creche and a man approached to ask for directions and she started screaming. Or she had to use a different door to enter the creche because of a broken lock. She was very upset and anxious."

Dr. Laura Markham: So, your daughter is so inflexible. It's at the point where anything unexpected makes her feel terribly unsafe, like it's a big emergency. Flexibility does seem to be in an innate trait, meaning some people are just born really inflexible. But it is worsened by a full emotional backpack. So all the tools that work for a full backpack will help your daughter. Getting her laughing, welcoming her tears, making sure when possible that there is a routine she understands.

Dr. Laura Markham: But in addition, I would start working with her on her flexibility and also her anxiety. So for flexibility, I recommend Lori Wright's book for children. The book is called *I Can Handle It*. And isn't that the message that we want to give our children? I can handle it. So, start reading Lori Wright's book with her, and start setting it as a positive thing to emulate that I can handle it. And also use, "it's not an emergency".

Dr. Laura Markham: So, you'll want to model using, "I can handle it" and "it's not an emergency". And you'll also want to talk with her about when those are good things for her to use to remind herself. And start teaching her about anxiety -- that the mind wants to keep her safe. So it tells her it's an emergency if she has to use a different door to enter the creche. But it's not really an emergency, is it? Same creche, same lovely people waiting inside to welcome her. No worries. No problem.

Dr. Laura Markham: Her mind was telling her something that wasn't even true because it was worried, trying to keep her safe. So it's fine for the mind to say that. Everybody needs a good alarm system to let us know if there's a problem. But when the mind tells her, it's her job to evaluate whether there's actually a problem, and to say to the mind, "Okay, thank you. I got this. I can handle it. It's not an emergency. Go lie down." Right?

Dr. Laura Markham: And of course, she's only three. So her prefrontal cortex is really just beginning to develop. And over time, it will get more and more able to manage the alarm system -- that's the amygdala, right? The limbic system is the emotional system, and the amygdala makes the alarm happen. And she's got a strong system there, a strong alarm system. But she doesn't yet have much prefrontal cortex to evaluate. And working with her on this will help her develop that prefrontal cortex more quickly, and make it more effective because you're giving her these tools to be consciously aware of it rather than just to get hijacked by her alarm system.

Dr. Laura Markham: While we're talking about good books for kids about anxiety, I want to throw in two more. Even though they're a little old for your daughter at three, everyone listening can utilize this. And I would get my hands on them also. And be prepared to talk to your daughter about the ideas in the books. So the first one is, *Hey, Warrior* by Karen Young. It goes in and out of print but if you can't get it on Amazon, you can get it on her website, Karen Young. The other book is *What To Do When You Worry Too Much* by Dawn Huebner. And again, it is more for 10 year olds, but you could read it and begin to work with a younger child, even a much younger child using those ideas.

Dr. Laura Markham: So even if your daughter is genetically inclined to be not very flexible, teaching her about anxiety and giving her tools to manage herself will really help the tendency.

Question 2:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:10:58

This parent is saying her eldest has always been very attached to her and now he's saying he's scared she won't come back if she goes on a business trip and that he cries and asks if she's going to die. And she's worried because she doesn't want to lie to him.

Dr. Laura Markham:

All kids worry about death by the time they're four or five. It's great he's telling you about it. Most kids just suffer silently, so I always suggest we begin to read books about death with kids by the time they're four or five, and there are great books on my website, a lot of listings. Just put books about death for kids into the search box, you'll find the page. Read the reviews of the books before you buy one to make sure it's a book that looks like it'd be good for your child. When I see books about death, I do not mean books that are going to freak your child out. There are books like *Peach and Blue*, which is a book about how we love each other even if we're not going to be here forever. And there are others, the book about Barney, who is I

think the dog that dies. I'm trying to remember the title of that one, but that's a very old and well known one. You can get a lot of these for very cheap on Amazon.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, it still will help him to read these books because it will actually reassure him. But the other thing is definitely don't lie to him about death, when you say you don't want to lie -- but you have to reassure the child. You know, we all know that really there's never a guarantee. Honestly, we could be hit by a car this afternoon crossing the street, any of us. However, it's highly unlikely. Odds are that's not going to happen. And all of us go on living our lives as if it's not going to happen. We get married, we have children, we get a mortgage on a house, we get in a car everyday, whatever. And I think we have to communicate to our children that we expect to have long, healthy lives. So reassure them, "Sweetheart, everybody dies someday. But usually our bodies work fine until we're very old. My body is very healthy. I take really good care of it and I expect to live a very long time until you are a grown man with children of your own and I hope you will live in a house right next door to me. You think you could do that?" Children find this very reassuring. Of course they're never going to live next door to you by then, but they find it very reassuring at this age. And they might even say, "I'm going to live with you even if I have kids." And you can say, "Great. That would be wonderful. I always want you near me."

Dr. Laura Markham:

Our job is to reassure that we want them near us. They get up to leave our laps when we've been reading to them, we grab them and pull them back and hug them and say, "I never want you to leave. Don't ever go away. Don't leave me here. I want you on my lap all the time." Right? I know it sounds crazy, but this is what allows them to leave, the knowledge that we want them with us.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And as far as death goes, also the knowledge that it's highly unlikely that we're going to die any time. If your child has had an actual death, like they know of an adult your age who's died, then it's a whole different ball game. That's a different question. It's not this parent's question

and I think for that, that's more of a specialized answer. And I would say at that point you really need to still give them a reassurance about your health, but you need to acknowledge how scary it is and you need to expect some acting out around it and you need to constantly reassure them. But I think in general, as long as you yourself are not struggling with a life threatening disease, I think you're not lying when you say that you intend to live a very long time.

Question 3:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:14:54

A parent says, "We've never had a babysitter. My three-year-old and my 22-month-old still have a really hard time with separation. What can we do?" Well, children don't just separate from us, right? They need to feel connected to the person you're leaving them with, so it is hard to leave them when you go to the gym or the Y and there's a very nice daycare center there. They're not going to want to stay there because they don't know those people, unless there's really enticing toys.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I would instead, to ease them into this, I would find a sitter who will come and hang out with you at home on the days when both boys are home and just pay her to show up once a week for an hour and play while you're there, like a mother's helper. Be sure to find someone who will eventually be available though at night on date nights and make her really special for your boys. Take her picture playing with them, talk with the picture, put it on your refrigerator and talk to the picture. So look on the website, the Aha! Parenting website for an article about helping your child adjust to a babysitter or to a daycare or to a school. There's articles about that. Look in the toddler section for that, separation anxiety, and use those ideas to help your kids bond with this woman, I presume it's going to be a woman.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And express excitement that she's coming to play and really foster the bond between her and your boys. If they're not happy to see her -- and remember you're not

leaving, you are there -- and if they're not happy to see her after a few visits, find a different person, someone they're excited about. And then after this person has come three or four times and they are enjoying this person, begin leaving the room for just a minute, like to do a chore or answer the phone or get a drink of water or something, and then you can begin leaving one child with her while you take the other into the kitchen to get something. Or send her outside to play with the kids if you have a yard, and gradually they'll begin to get used to her because you're there and they're not going to feel a loss. And then they have a relationship and then she's more like an auntie than just somebody they've never met.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And then, you pick a time when you say you have to go to the store for a few minutes and you don't have to actually go to the store, you have to leave the house for a few minutes and they're going to pick out something great that they can do, where they're doing some water play or some sand play or some clay or something that they're going to love doing, making cupcakes or frosting cupcakes, and say, "Oh, I just have to run to the store for just a minute." And you don't actually have to go to that place, you're just leaving the house.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Hug them, tell them you'll be back in just a few minutes and leave. Now they may cry. They may cry and you have by now explained to your caregiver that if they cry, she's to comfort them and say, "I know you miss your mommy. She'll be back soon. Do you want to frost the cupcakes with me? We can do that." Even if it means they stuff their feelings, it's okay. She's there taking care of them. They don't have to completely fall apart for an hour. You leave and you return in just a few minutes. Now it's better if you can wait to come back until they stop crying, like 10 or 15 minutes later. But if they're crying for more than 15 minutes, I would say just come back, and you can text her. Are they crying still? Have they stopped? And then you can come in or she can text you as soon as they stop.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Or, if they're still crying after 15 minutes, then you check in and then you come back. But they will stop crying

gradually or they'll cry for a shorter time because they get that you always come back. And then you gradually build up to longer times, and then you start doing it on weekends and you and your partner can even go out on a weekend day at first if that seems easier than an evening, depending on getting your kids to bed at night.

Dr. Laura Markham:

People listening to this may think, "Well, this is overkill." Well maybe, but if your kids have a lot of separation anxiety, this is a way to do it. It's sort of like you don't throw your kid in the deep end to teach them to swim, or they will always have issues about swimming. Instead you gradually get them into the water and gradually get them comfortable in the water. They gradually start playing in the water. They gradually start swimming and they learn to swim.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So in the end it builds your kid's resilience in managing with parting from you. And I think you'll find that it will really work for you. It's not a no cry approach. They may cry with her. But it's a whole lot less crying and you're not going to traumatize them and then be sorry about it later. You're not going to get spill-over, like nightmares, because you did the drop-them-in-the-water-cold kind of approach.

Question 4:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:19:50

A parent is asking about her daughter who is now seven and really oppositional and difficult. I always say that defiance like that comes from not a strong enough relationship, but it doesn't look like you have done anything to not have a good enough relationship with your daughter. It looks to me, and I think this is really important for everyone listening, like your daughter has something in the way of the relationship. And what gets in the way for her I think is anxiety. From your description, I'm seeing that your daughter tends to be anxious and that makes her oppositional.

Dr. Laura Markham: It's very common for that (anxiety) to make kids oppositional. And remember, when kids are anxious, it gets in the way of the connection. So they don't feel as safe, and also, they're highly sensitive, anxious kids. They're taking everything in and they're often not very comfortable crying. So they're not letting the stuff out and they're not crying, so they have a full backpack and a full backpack gets in the way of connection as well.

Dr. Laura Markham: So remember, connection is heart to heart between two people. And if your child is stuffing things in their backpack, they're carrying around a full backpack of stuff that they don't want to feel, and they cut it off, and all the feelings are in the same place, the good ones and the bad ones. If they're cutting off access to their emotions, the bad ones, they're also cutting off access to their heart, to their connection to you. So they're not as connected to you as they could be. They don't feel as safe and they're not going to be as open to your influence.

Dr. Laura Markham: I sometimes hear from parents, "You know, it sounds like you're saying it's all my fault that I'm not connecting enough." No, no, no. Every child is unique. Every child has their own stuff and some kids are harder to connect with than others. But remember, kids get disconnected very easily from us regardless of what we do. **We** feel connected. Meanwhile, **they've** got a full backpack, **they** don't feel connected. Or they're anxious or highly sensitive and that adds to the full backpack. They're not feeling connected to us.

Dr. Laura Markham: So I think that this is all about the full backpack. And you did say in your note to me that you and your partner are working really hard on laughing with your daughter. Fantastic. That's where you want to start so that you can ease into crying. That's wonderful. And you say that it's hard to stay open and gentle when she behaves badly, especially in a social situation. Of course. It is so hard to stay patient. It's the hardest thing we ever do. And when it's a social situation, we feel humiliated. I totally get it. You have to try to prep her for social situations, but you can expect that a highly sensitive, anxious kid is going to

be defiant in a social situation. I would try to minimize her social situations, honestly. And I get that it's the hardest thing (staying patient). From your note I can tell you know, that it's the only thing. It's not going to help your daughter for you to become punitive. Right? So I think that will just increase her anxiety, her fear that she's not good enough, and you really don't love her. Anxiety is fear, right?

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I'm going to suggest that you get your daughter assessed for anxiety, and yes it is true that anxiety sometimes comes from trauma. And you mentioned that there was a traumatic time period when her sister was born. You asked about EMDR in your note to me. It's conceivable that will help your daughter. I don't know because I don't really know how much this is about trauma, but what I love about EMDR is that it's specifically designed to help us work through traumas, right? EMDR, people ask me what does it stand for? It stands for eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. It all started when Francine Shapiro, who is a therapist, realized that when people are emotionally processing, they do this movement with their eyes that's reminiscent of REM sleep, R-E-M sleep. REM sleep is when we process emotions when we're dreaming. And the emotion gets sort of processed so we can detach it from our memory and the memory gets filed away properly so that next time we remember it, we're not overwhelmed by all those same feelings.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Of course when it's really traumatic we can't. The REM sleep isn't sufficient to do that, and what happens is the memory gets filed away in a junk pile because we can't actually process the memory because it's too overwhelming to us. That's what happens with trauma. So Francine Shapiro actually developed a process for helping people work through old traumas, even things that they can't verbalize that are very early in life, and helped people to work through those starting with eye movement, but later using also biofeedback and other mechanisms. And so there are people who've taken a weekend workshop in EMDR, do not let those people be your EMDR therapist. You need someone who is actually

trained and certified by EMDRIA, which is the international institute. If you go on their website, they have links all over the world to people who do EMDR and who have the training. That's what you want obviously.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I'm suggesting that maybe since you mentioned trauma that would be appropriate for your daughter, but I also think she may just need help with her anxiety. And you know, anxiety is something that doesn't go away, but we learn to manage it. And she may need some help learning to manage it. So depending on where you live, you'll find somebody who can do that. In the Northeast, I always recommend Tamar Chansky, who has a few books out on childhood anxiety. She's wonderful and I've known people who've seen her and it really worked. I mean their kids really healed and were able to move on.

And then I'll also just add, anxiety is also caused by a full backpack. So when I said it doesn't go away, a tendency to anxiety won't go away. A tendency to be highly sensitive won't go away. But you can definitely reduce anxiety by making sure your daughter gets a daily chance to cry, AND of course she's not going to do that until she has a daily chance to laugh. So those are your priorities.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You also asked about family counseling. I think family counseling is great. You know, when we tell our children we're going to take them to counseling, they feel like they're broken. That's the message to them. So family counseling is a hundred times better. And also you said that your husband has a hard time with your daughter's behavior. Family counseling might really help that. But she is only six, so I would really want to be getting her the help for what's making her so anxious. Laughing, crying, OT, if there's sensory stuff going on, evaluation for anxiety, and EMDR, since you seem to think that there's trauma involved.

Question 5:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:27:09

A parent is asking about his son who's three years old and has some self-soothing behaviors. Sometimes people call these self stimulating behaviors because the child is often stimulating their ear or their lips or even their genitals or their nipples and so they're called self stimulating, but I think of these as self-soothing behaviors. And it can be very embarrassing when your kid does that kind of thing in public, indeed. The good news is that your son, it sounds like when he's having a good day, is very able to be re-engaged in a conversation and he stops this behavior immediately. But when he's having a hard day, if he's bored or if he's hurt himself, for instance, or if he got scared of something, then he will do this behavior and it's hard to get him to stop.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And apparently he started this behavior when he was being weaned when he was a year old and then started daycare a few months later. So in three months, he started these behaviors and they really solidified when he started daycare.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So here's the thing. This came from trying to keep himself from crying and feeling those awful feelings. He wanted to cry, he stuffed it down, and he did this behavior to keep the feelings down. That's what this self calming behavior is. It's actually an attempt to keep the feelings, in this case, the tears, from wanting to nurse or from being separated from you when he went to daycare. It's to keep those tears down. So this is holding in the feelings in the backpack. You mentioned that he does this if he sits on his mom's lap to read a book, and so you think it's about being safe. Well, you're right in a way because when kids feel safe is when the feelings in the emotional backpack come up to get healed. And so he may be doing this when he feels safe, when those feelings start to come up in an attempt to keep the feelings down. So the cure for that is to cry. This is a child who desperately, desperately needs to cry. If he isn't crying every day for a long time, then that's what he needs to do. And the way he'll feel safe enough to do that is from laughter.

At those times when he starts to do these behaviors, I'd go right up and take him in your arms and hold him and say, "You feel so bad today. You were so stressed or scared by that thing that happened when you got scared," or whatever, if you know why he's having a hard day. Or, "You've just been grumpy since you got up this morning. Oh my poor baby. Some days we just need to cry, don't we?" And if he feels safe enough, he might even cry.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But you say he won't stop doing it. Actually physically stop him from the behavior he's doing, because this is the way that those feelings will now come up and he'll cry. And you want to do it now. He's only three. This is the time to do it. Do not wait. You don't want to wait until he's six and still doing this as a way to control his own feelings. And you could, as you're working on this, give him a squeeze ball, which is more socially acceptable so that if you're going to be somewhere in public and you know he's having a hard day, give him the squeeze ball and he can use that. And if he starts to self stimulate, you can just hand him the squeeze ball to use instead. I mean, you couldn't do that without having first talked about it and given it to him at home sometimes so he knows what you're doing. And obviously if he's doing it in the privacy of his own room, you're not going to stop him.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But then finally I would just say, this is a child who needs preventive maintenance. Maybe he's super easily stressed, highly sensitive. We don't know. But on those days -- you said you seem to recognize when he's having a good day or a bad day -- when he's having a bad day, he's got to have the laughter and the tears. He's got to have the preventive maintenance. There is no way around it for this child. Just so you know.

Question 6:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:31:03

This parent is asking about her seven-year-old who gets very anxious if she's pushed to do something and therefore gets oppositional. You know, anxiety in kids

often comes out as opposition. We think that the child is being oppositional and defiant, but they're actually being anxious and so they get oppositional.

So you're saying that she'll calm down on her own and apologize later, whereas if you stay she escalates her behavior. So if that works, that's great. You know what I'm saying? If she does calm down on her own and apologizes later, then that's fine. And if you stay, she escalates her behavior, that's fine.

Dr. Laura Markham:

When she's pushing her emotions away, I wonder if she would cry if you stayed near her. So you might try staying right outside her door and slipping notes under the door. That's often very effective. She feels safe enough then to cry inside the door.

You're asking how to handle the sister on these occasions when things are disruptive. Sister is old enough probably for an audiobook in this case.

Question 7:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:32:11

A parent is worried about her daughter who refuses to go to the restroom unless somebody is standing guard. She's afraid to be in the restroom and it's because she had labial adhesions as a little one, and when she gets scared, she associates fear now around this, even though it no longer hurts her to go to the bathroom. That's great that you've eased into not being within eyeshot but within earshot and you talk to her.

Dr. Laura Markham:

The next thing to do is help her with her fear of you walking away. That's what you begin to help her with. And you can do that by telling her, not actually walking away, but telling her you're going to. While she's on the toilet, you say, "I'm going to walk away, but I will come if you need me." And if she cries, great. And you can tell her this even before she's on the toilet, if she'll cry. It's the same approach that you would use for bedtime. That's listed in

the emotional intelligence chapter of the book (*Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*). There's a whole rundown of how you would help a child who does not want to go to sleep who has an anxiety issue, and how you say that you're going to leave even though you don't leave. And that's what you're doing here.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So she gets a chance to cry, but you haven't even actually left. And you're going to feel like you're torturing her. You're actually going to threaten to walk away essentially, not in a mean way, but just say "We're going to leave" or "I'm going to walk away, but I'll come back if you need me," and she will cry. But she will gradually be able to handle you leaving.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But, let me add, don't try that out cold turkey. First, try a lot of laughter. Beg her not to leave you while you're on the toilet, and where the Teddy bear begs somebody not to leave them when they're on the toilet, and do whatever you can to get her laughing about it before you actually go through with the walking away situation where she's going to cry. But do read the part in the book, in *Peaceful Parent Happy Kids* that describes how to do this for sleep in the emotional intelligence chapter.

Question 8:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:34:23

A parent is asking how to promote self confidence in an anxious child. "He often says things like, 'I hate school,' but he actually loves it." Truthfully, if he says he hates school, he probably has two feelings about it. You can say, "Huh, I know you love learning things there, but sometimes you say you hate it. I wonder why?" You're saying here that it's because his best friend says it. You can say, "Hmm. I've heard your friend so-and-so say that he hates school. I wonder if you'd like to be like him."

Dr. Laura Markham:

You're also saying that in general you, the parents, don't feel like you have high levels of self confidence, so how can you help him be self confident? His self confidence will come from two places: Feeling adored by his parents, like you delight in him and you could not possibly love anyone more than you love him, that's number one. And number two from mastery, from actually learning to do things. If he has those two things, he's going to have high levels of self confidence. And the mastery chapter we haven't gotten to yet. It's the last chapter of the book, but don't worry, we will get there.

Question 9:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:35:29

A parent is saying that her five-year-old is scared of people in costumes. Look at the letter on my website where the child is scared of Bees.

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/ask-the-doctor-1/helping-child-with-fear-of-bees-phobia>

Use that as your guide as you help your child work through the specific fear that she's developed of mascots and people who are in costumes.

Question 10:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:35:48

This question is about a strong-willed, sensitive, six year old, who is slow to transition. He was selectively mute, he was socially anxious, he had excessive hand-washing, and you have overcome those things. I just want to say how amazing that is. That's just remarkable that you've been able to do that. And I want to remind you, I know you know this -- Hitting comes from fear. Anxiety is just a form of fear.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you know, anxiety is fear, so the hitting makes sense. But you do have to help him with the fear. Just empathizing is not enough. Right? Anxious kids need laughter more than other kids. It's often harder to make them laugh. That's what he needs.

So when he's upset and his emotions are overwhelming, you need to stop him from hitting. You don't want him hitting you and you don't want him hitting his sister. So you just need to take him in your arms and hold him and stop him from hitting. And he's only three years old. You can do that if you need to. Don't hold him against his will if he's willing to stop hitting, but if he's hitting you and his sister, you need to stop him from hitting if necessary by holding him. Always do that with as much compassion as you can muster and always let him know that you'll stop holding him as soon as he stops hitting. He can push against your hands, but he cannot hit.

You create safety with your compassion at that moment that will help him to not be so afraid. But it would be good to help him with the general level of anxiety, the general level of fear he's carrying around. And we do that with laughter. You don't have to know what those fears are to get him laughing. Right? That's the most important thing you can do to alleviate anxiety.

Dr. Laura Markham: And, when I say get a kid laughing, I'm always talking about like 15 minutes. Which is a really long time to have a kid laugh, just so you know. And you might have to do it twice a day with a kid who is super anxious. But you don't actually have to know about the specific fears. You're just settling down the general fear reaction that's causing him to lash out. And I want to warn you that when kids who are anxious do a lot of laughing, they restore the balance in their body, the chemical balance, but it allows the deeper fears to surface. And when fear comes up it looks like a toddler tantrum.

Dr. Laura Markham: So I want to let you know that, because that can be a little scary. And he's already six, so that's sort of old to go through that kind of fear, and

flail and kick and scream. But, once kids express that safely with you, then they're relaxed and happy. So the more you can create safety with your empathy 24/7, special time and laughter, I think the more likely he's going to get to the point where he's going to cry.

Question 11:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:38:33

This parent is asking about her nine-year-old. Her nine-year-old talks like a baby in anxiety-causing situations. She is otherwise well-behaved and mature at school. So I would talk to her about those anxiety producing situations and normalize them. "Honey, it's natural to feel anxious when those things happen. And when people feel anxious what they do is they use a coping mechanism to calm themselves down. And what coping mechanisms do you use?"

And she might say that she does baby talk. If she doesn't say you'll have to point out to her that she uses baby talk. And you can ask her, "Oh right, you do use baby talk. How does that work for you?" So, obviously, one of the pros might be that it calms her down. And one of the cons might be that people might stare at her and think she's weird. And if they don't do that yet they might as she gets older.

So then you can say to her, "Yeah, and it's okay to use that coping mechanism but there are some coping mechanisms that we could learn that don't have that downside. See if we could think of any. Okay? Let's brainstorm."

Dr. Laura Markham:

There are some that you use before you're in that anxiety producing situation and there's some you use during it. So maybe you use laughing before you go into the situation. And maybe you use tapping. Tapping is EFT, there's an article about it on the Aha! Parenting website. Just put EFT into the search box and you'll find the article. So that's tapping, it reduces anxiety. I've just read some more recent research about how it is effective in doing that and

I've seen that it's very effective. And then some of the coping mechanisms might be things she could use in the moment. Again, tapping you can do sort of surreptitiously under the table. A mantra you can say to yourself in your head or some other way to reassure yourself verbally. What could she say to herself if meeting a new person makes her anxious? What could she say to herself when she meets a new person? "Oh, I'm curious about who this person is. So I don't need to be anxious about it. They're curious about me too." Right? What could she say to herself?

Dr. Laura Markham:

Or you said when she speaks in public in her classroom. She could say to herself, "They're rooting for me. They're rooting for me." Or, "I have a lot of cool things to share with them. This isn't really about me, it's about all the cool info I'm sharing that they want to hear." Right? So you're just giving her coping mechanisms. And you're also, again, getting her laughing to keep her from having as much anxiety when she's in those situations.

Question 12:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:40:55

Here's a question from a parent who says, "My grandmother lives downstairs so my almost-three-year-old spends almost an hour daily with her. She often tells him, while they're playing, 'I'm afraid of dogs, they bite.' So now he's afraid of dogs. How can we help him get past this fear?" Well, first of all, how lovely that your three-year-old has his great-grandmother to play with. But, of course, everyone passes on their own issues, and fear of dogs is obviously one of hers. So most of the time when we're afraid we assume that the appropriate response is to move away from the thing we're afraid of, to avoid it at all costs. But the result of that is that is when you give fear an inch, it has a way of taking a mile. That's just the way fear works. Right? When we don't confront it, it begins to grow and it begins to expand to other things.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you can see that, in addition to dogs, your son has now generalized to also be afraid of cats. You mentioned that he's afraid of cats now, too.

So, to reduce fear, you have to go toward it. At least energetically. You have to go toward what you're afraid of. It's hard to talk about fear. Confronting fear doesn't mean you argue with fear. Fear is not rational so rational arguments are not going to disarm it. You simply have to face the fear, to move toward it, without letting it swamp you. So you move toward it even a tiny bit at a time. That act is an act of courage. You breathe through the fear and then you can go another step, that's how fear works. And it begins to subside.

So, for your son, you have to always encourage children to gradually approach the thing that they fear.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So if you teach your son that, when he's afraid of something, that's a signal that he needs to be courageous and move toward that thing. And that includes dogs. Explain that, once in a while, when dogs are scared they do bite. Which might've happened to his great-grandmother. I mean, you don't even know if his great-grandmother actually got bitten, right? I would have a conversation with her. "Grandma did you actually get bitten by a dog or do you just think they bite?" Right? Like what is that about?

And maybe it did happen to her and you can talk to your son about that. "It happened, but grandma's fine. Grandma's fine. It didn't hurt her badly, she's okay. And most of the time dogs don't bite. And there are ways to be safe around dogs so that they won't bite us. So if the dog feels safe, it won't bite..."

So, to build your courage, Sweetheart, let's introduce ourselves to the dogs we meet. And you don't have to touch them, but I'm going to introduce us to all the dogs we meet and we'll see if they're friendly."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you role model. You're on the street, you see a dog, there's the owner. And you say, "Let's see if he's friendly. We always start by asking the owner if he's friendly and what his name is and if we can pet it." So you do that and you pet the dog. And, if your son is too scared to tolerate you doing this, you pick your son up, hold him in your arms as you pet the dog with your other hand. Never force your son to pet the dog. But over time he's going to start also petting the dog. So this will take time but, if you make it a point to befriend every dog you see, your son will gradually lose his fear.

There's also an article on the Aha! Parenting website that I think will be very helpful to you. If you put the word bee, like bees that fly and buzz, there's an article on helping a child with a fear of bees phobia
<https://www.ahaparenting.com/ask-the-doctor-1/helping-child-with-fear-of-bees-phobia>

And it's completely transferable to dogs and other fears if you have a child with fears.

Question 13:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:44:11

Okay, here's a question from a parent who says, "I suffered with postnatal anxiety after my first son and depression after my second." Oh, I'm so sorry. "I've attended really helpful counseling and support groups, but I feel my boys have some residual anger in having experienced me yelling a lot and being rough at times."

So I'm very glad that you found helpful support groups. It's really disabling to have postnatal anxiety or depression and it's surprisingly common. And good for you for recognizing that your kids may well have some residual effects. They often do and we often don't recognize it.

The good news is that Peaceful Parenting preventive maintenance will always help kids with residual negative emotions. That's because what the child desperately

needs to heal is the safety of the parent's love. They need to feel seen, they need to be valued, right? So when you begin to focus on connection, using empathy, using special time, the child begins to feel those things.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But, of course, now the hard part comes. Right? And so if you're starting Peaceful Parenting now, you may have already gotten to the hard part, which is that often it will come out in anger and fear as the child begins to show you. As they begin to experience all the old tears and fears. This is often a challenge for any family making the transition to Peaceful Parenting. The challenge is for the parent to remember that, when the child begins to show these old feelings, the parent's job is to stay calm and to accept them and to not get sucked into a fight. Right? Just acknowledge the child's pain and hurt. So you don't have to do anything special to dig up those old wounds that your children have. You just have to handle their current upsets in a loving way because really all current upsets are triggered by old upsets.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And that's true for all of us. In fact, I really believe that if we really worked out every painful thing that happened in our own childhood before the age of seven, we would basically be completely not able to be triggered in our current lives. I think so much of the work is on very old stuff for us. And, of course, that's true for our children as well. Right?

But that means that it's a good thing. Because that means that any current trigger is actually showing you old, old upsets. And you can help your child work them through. Right?

So remember you do need to faithfully use the Peaceful Parenting tools. If you don't use laughter, you can't help your children's anxiety and anger. If you don't use empathy or special time, you aren't creating enough safety. Right? So they can't get past their anger and they get stuck in it. But I think that you'll find that, if you are able to really faithfully use the Peaceful Parenting tools, your kids will slowly but surely get over the experiences

they had. And, how great that you're taking the time now to really help your kids past those old experiences.

Question 14:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:47:08

So this is a question from a parent who says, "My four-year-old daughter has shown signs of anxiety since birth. Recently she was a flower girl in a wedding and also participated in her Pre-K graduation. At the rehearsals for both she refused to participate, but at each event she did." So no problem. So I think that rehearsals for big events like weddings are scary for kids. There are grownups telling them what to do in a way that makes no sense to the kid. And the whole thing feels very stilted and formal and scary to the child. And even rehearsals about Pre-K graduations are usually loaded with anxiety, as the grown ups put the kids through the motions. And in advance of this event, the four-year-old doesn't really get the difference between the rehearsal and the actual event. They just know the rehearsal feels tense. So a child who's already anxious might well have her anxiety go through the roof as the rehearsal is beginning. Right? So she might refuse to participate in it at that moment.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But, here's the good news, your daughter may have refused to participate in those rehearsals, but they served their function for her. They reduced her fear level so she was able to play her part in the actual events.

So, to avoid this in the future, I would prepare her by acting out the event in advance, even the rehearsal, at home. So she knows what to expect. And, this is also very important, as you act it out with her, get her laughing. Don't be stodgy and formal even if it's a formal event like a wedding rehearsal. During your rehearsal at home be super silly so your kid laughs and laughs to reduce her anxiety. And then, when it comes time for the actual rehearsal, she won't go in already feeling anxious and she's likely to participate in it.

Also, there's an article on my website on helping a child cope with anticipatory stage fright that might be helpful to you. It's called "How Much To Push Kids And How Much To Help Them Through Stage Fright."

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/ask-the-doctor-1/how-much-to-push-kids-and-how-to-help-them-through-fear>

Question 15:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:49:05

"Our five-year-old has started to put toys and weird things in his mouth. Is this related to anxiety? He never did this as a baby when it was more age appropriate. He also eats piles of sand."

Eating piles of sand is either PICA, which I doubt he has or you would know it; you can Google that online. It's a biological disorder that makes us eat things that are not food. Or it could be a sensory issue. And the other things going in his mouth also sounds like a sensory issue. That often overlaps with anxiety. And so you said, "Is this related to anxiety?" It could be. You don't mention other signs of anxiety, you don't mention other sensory issues. So I can't diagnose this from here. I would first talk to your pediatrician about his sand habit to see if it's PICA.

I don't know how much you've worked with the preventive maintenance, but I would really do sensory play of all kinds and see if that changes anything. And I would also really work with laughter. As I've discussed, it really reduces anxiety. And I think that you will see a change. But if you don't, again, I would take him to an anxiety specialist.

Question 16:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:50:20

Here's a question from a parent who says, "My oldest son had a very full backpack, but has grown into a more confident child and the meltdowns have decreased." Yay!

So how great. And that's a tribute to your hard work, how wonderful.

AND he's still pulling your hair when he has a meltdown. So you hold his hand, you ask him to let go. You say he must be really upset. You say, "I know you don't want to hurt me." Well actually, at that moment, he does want to hurt you. So what you say is, "Right now you are very mad. You're showing me how mad you are and you even want to hurt. But, sweetheart, no hurting. We can solve this. I'm right here for you. Let go of my hair." So you're giving him an instruction in that moment. "You can grab onto my hand and show me how upset you are." Right?

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you're saying all the right things! And your best bet, honestly, is prevention. And you know what I'm going to say: laughter, special time, 24/7 empathy.

But I'm going to say one other thing, and you're going to think I'm totally nuts, cut your hair. I know that sounds ridiculous. But, honestly, I cut my hair off when my kid was a baby because why do you want your nine-month-old grabbing your hair? Which is what nine-month-olds are actually designed, probably evolutionarily, to do to stabilize themselves. Would you wear a necklace or earrings when you had a baby or a toddler? No, you don't. You stop wearing it for that period of time. And you don't have long hair for that period of time either, probably. So if you have a kid who is pulling your hair, I would find a way to have your hair cut short and enjoy that. Don't worry, hair grows back.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You don't say how old he is but, since he's your oldest, you're saying that you can't really do special time with your younger child because your oldest can't be by himself. I want to say I think that sounds like anxiety. So, again, back to laughing. He's getting angry and having these meltdowns, and I know they're getting better with preventative maintenance, but part of this is anxiety. So I would really work on the laughing.

And I bet you can find something to keep him busy since he's your oldest -- even though I don't know how old he is -- while you're doing special time with his brother. So books on tape, audio books, special box. There's a lot of suggestions in my sibling book. And there's also an article online, "When Both Kids Need You At Once" at AhaParenting.com.

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/siblings/big-emotions-with-multiple-upset-children>

Question 17:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:52:59

A parent has asked about competition. Her son is very competitive to the extent that he has to win every game or he has a meltdown. He's seven now and he doesn't try new things because he's no good at them. And he gets very upset with new things and games because he needs to be good enough. So your little guy is seven now. And have you seen a change in this? Has he gotten better at it over time? Has he gotten a little more able to manage himself or not?

Parent:

Yes and no. He has. He will try. So all his life he says no to anything that's optional. Anything you say, "Would you like to go and try bowling or whatever?" And he'll say, "No, no, I don't want to try it. I'll just watch." And then now he loves cycling. So he's happy to cycle with me. But he goes to a cycling club with other kids. But when we get there, if it's something new, he won't try. He will just say, "I can't do it. I'm not. I can't do it," he says. And he just won't try. He might try at home with me, later. But he just won't try and he cries and gets very upset and frustrated.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Oh, poor guy. So he feels like people are looking at him and he'll look foolish and he doesn't want to try. Is that right?

Parent:

Yeah, but also I see other kids who don't want to try who blend in. Do you know what I mean? They sort of look as if they're trying and nobody knows the difference. Whereas

he's more likely to stand back and not follow the others and be separate from everyone. Peer pressure doesn't affect him. He's not bothered by what others think. He'd rather just not try something if he doesn't think he can do it. He will if he's one-on-one; he's not so good in a group situation. If he's one-on-one with someone, then he's fine. But he doesn't mind missing out, really. And then he misses out on the fun bits as well because he won't do the less fun things.

Dr. Laura Markham: Right. So this is about fear of looking foolish. And you said it's not peer pressure. I think it sounds like it's so bad to look foolish that he would rather look foolish to not participate than conform.

Parent: Right, yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham: ... The idea that he's really not good enough by looking foolish to not be able to do it. Does that make sense?

Parent: I know what you mean. Yeah. As an adult, that almost sounds ridiculous. But I, yeah, I know what you mean. Not taking part so therefore he hasn't failed.

Dr. Laura Markham: Yes, exactly. Not taking part so therefore he hasn't failed.

Parent: I mean, he is naturally a perfectionist. And some of that is improving. He used to hate writing because if he drew a letter slightly wrong he'd just give up. And now he perseveres a bit more. He will try and try at some things. If he wants to, he will try and try. And at school he's fine. I think there he can just be slow. He just stops if he's struggling with something. If he did it once and failed it's easier to understand, somehow, but to not even try. It's quite hard to see.

Dr. Laura Markham: Well, he's sure he's going to fail. Or he's worried enough that he's going to fail that he's not willing to even take the chance. So he's old enough that you could actually empathize with him and help him see different strategies to handle the situation. Because he regards himself as having a problem and telling him not to have the problem

or not to be foolish about it will not make the problem go away in his mind. Right? So we can't just say, "Oh, don't worry about it. Everybody learns, don't worry." That's not going to help.

Parent: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham: He's still going to worry. So how can we help him solve his problem? So one thing you can say is, "It's natural to be nervous when you try something new. Everyone's nervous when they try something new, everyone. And it feels stressful."

And so you could say to him, "When we go to cycling and they're doing something new, you're worried about it. You're not the only one who's worried. If you look around, some of those other kids are worried, too, and they just go ahead and try it. And other kids are worried, too, but they blend in. Do you notice they're looking like they're trying it, even if they're not quite?" You could show him how the other kids are doing it. Would he hear that?

Parent: Yesterday he was so upset that we were looking at the other kids and he just didn't want to think about it. But, on a calmer occasion, he probably would.

Dr. Laura Markham: Oh, got you.

Parent: Catching him before he melts down.

Dr. Laura Markham: One thing that will help with that, I think, is to play with him before you take him to something new, anything new, cycling or anything. Get him laughing. If you can play with him and really get him laughing, that will reduce the tension he's carrying. And that way, when he goes in, he feels better and he's more able to handle the anxiety of the new situation. If he goes to cycling or something else and he's just been in school all day, then he's already got a full backpack. He can't take on anything new and he's just too anxious and it freezes him. And he can't even hear you when you say, "Oh, but that child's looking like they're

trying, even though they're not. They're fitting in." So he can't even hear you, really, in that kind of a situation.

So if you can somehow figure out a way to get him roughhousing so that he laughs before you try something new that will really help.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And also think about mistakes. How can you have a mistake of the day? Everybody at the dinner table has to share the biggest mistake they made that day. And we all are going to laugh about them, basically. And if somebody says, "I didn't make any mistakes." Say, "Really? Not one mistake?" And everybody does something that's a mistake every single day. And so I think that will help him feel like it's really not terrible to make mistakes. Once they feel like it's not so terrible, it makes them relax a little bit when they're in a situation with something new happening.

Question 18:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:59:58

A parent is saying that her six-year-old can work herself up into hysterics if she hurts herself physically, if she feels she's embarrassed herself, or if she falls and slips in front of anyone. Now that's actually about shame, interestingly. Right? It's all about embarrassment in front of other people, if she falls in front of someone. She also has separation anxiety. Aha, so this is shame as well as separation anxiety. Shame is related to anxiety because it's a fear of being rejected because you aren't good enough, because you're secretly bad inside. So actually shame is related to fear. Shame is a lack of self love. Shame is when we beat ourselves up.

And we do that, usually, as a defense against some unbearable feeling like we're not good enough. Just like we lash out as a defense against unbearable feelings.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I would, again, prescribe laughter and roughhousing for the anxiety. But I think the hysteria is from a full backpack. So she's getting triggered and overwhelmed. So I would really do the preventative maintenance tools that are essential to help kids cry. And I think you'll find that will help. And, about the shame, I would start talking to her about shame and about how sometimes we have a voice in our head that tells us we're not good enough but we are. And see if you can get some traction with her that way.

Question 19:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:01:17

A parent says, "My four-year-old has always been prone to anxiety. He spent all summer saying he wasn't going to go (to school). And, the night before starting school, he turned around and said, 'Mommy, I'll be brave. I'll go to school.' And he settled well! But now he's refusing to do any of his extra activities like swimming lessons, and that leads to meltdowns."

So, I would say he only started school in September. It took a lot of courage. He summoned his courage up. He went. He settled in, that's fantastic. And you can build on that success, that strength that he discovered in himself that you supported him to find. That's wonderful. I suspect that his big emotions about swimming activities are really about school.

Dr. Laura Markham:

When you announce that swimming classes are tomorrow and he has a meltdown, I would treat it very tenderly. I would just accept, acknowledge, "You don't want to go swimming. You've been so brave lately. You started school and you go every morning and you've made friends and you're learning new things. But sometimes you feel scared, don't you?"

So I would put those feelings out on the table and allow him to cry about them. And I think what you'll find is that his big emotions about school will come out and he won't

be as afraid of swimming. Because I think it's related. He's sort of done all the bravery he can, and that's why he's resisting extra things.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And later when he's not crying, when he's recovered, talk about how brave he is and how proud he must be of himself. Starting school isn't easy, it takes courage. He's shown how brave he can be and he can do other hard things too, like swim class. And I would say, "You do need to begin swim class again, Sweetheart. What would make that easier for you? What can I do to help you if you get scared before we go? What words would you need to hear at that time to make you braver? It's natural to be scared, that's okay. Courage is feeling the fear and doing it anyway, the same way you did for school. You're bigger than that fear!"

And I just suggest you help him take one step after another in the right direction. So, even if you just drive to swim and he doesn't go in, that's a step in the right direction that you give him a lot of credit for.

And that way every week you drive to swim no matter what, even if he doesn't go in. And then you start driving to swim and watching the other kids swim, you do go in. Eventually he's going to be in the water.

Question 20:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:03:29

A parent says, "My toddler is very sensitive to physical pain and overreacts to even a tiny scratch or a bruise. What should we say when she hurts herself? She was seven months old and had an accident and was treated at the hospital. Could that be connected and would EMDR help it?"

So I would say yes. This anxiety about getting hurt could certainly be connected with the accident when she was seven months old. I would make a book for her about the accident. There's information on making books on the

Aha! Parenting website. It's not about accidents, but there's information about siblings, a sibling book with an example. And there's information about making a book for when you go to the hospital to have the new baby, making a book for your older kid. And those will give you examples. The important thing about the book is that you use pictures of her as a baby, how happy she was. And then the accident happened and she had to go to the hospital. And the doctors helped her and mommy and daddy helped her.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But the most important thing is the happy ending. Her body was so strong, it healed itself and now she's fine. Her body is always strong and it's able to overcome things that happen to it. So when it gets hurt, when it gets a bump or a bruise or a scratch or an owie, she might ask for a Band-Aid and she might even cry a little bit, but her body always makes itself better. That's the end of the story. And you could call it "My Strong Body" or something.

And, yes, EMDR practitioners who are experienced with children do use other techniques besides the eye movement. Because she's too young for that, probably. They use music in headphones and the music goes from one ear to the other and that seems to have a similar effect. And even though she doesn't talk that well at two-and-a-half, she does have verbal understanding. So if a therapist talked to her about scratches and bruises and maybe even about the accident, especially once she's read the book about the accident with you a bunch, I think a therapist could help her, an EMDR therapist, with this issue. And I would. I'm always a fan of intervening as early as possible before their brains take shape around their upset.

Question 21:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:05:43

The next question is from a parent who says, "When my three-and-a-half year old son is anxious, he acts very busy, darting around the room or acting out. I try to empathize

with him, but he doesn't seem to take in anything I say. He avoids eye contact. He gets like this when we're at the doctor's office or waiting in the hallway before preschool. And almost always after misbehaving, like if he just hit his brother. How can I get through to him and help him calm down?"

So, you already know this is anxiety. That means your son is in a state of heightened arousal: fight, flight, or freeze mode. His cognitive capacity is not fully online. He's just adrenalized to run. In fact, his constant activity, busyness, darting about is about flight. He's too frightened to sit still, too frightened to make eye contact. So you're right, it's very hard to reach someone in that state. They're not taking in new information from the environment.

Can you talk with him while he's not in this state about what that is like for him? Make sure he doesn't feel ashamed by this discussion.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Make it about how the brain works. When our brains get scared, they flip their lid so the thinking part of the brain is no longer in charge. You can use Dan Siegel and Tina Bryson's book, *The Whole Brain Child*, which has diagrams that are meant for children. But, at three-and-a-half, he may be a bit young for that. So you might just want to watch a YouTube video of Dan Siegel explaining the concept of flipping your lid. And then demonstrate it for your son with your own hands. He'll probably love doing it and practicing it himself. Then ask him to practice with an antidote, something that will bring him back to center. It will probably need to be physical to channel all that nervous energy. So maybe tapping, EFT. Look that up on my website. EFT, it stands for Emotional Freedom Technique.

And it's basically working with the energy meridians to offload stress in the body and shift the state that the body is in.

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/emotional-intelligence/EFT-with-kids>

Dr. Laura Markham:

Then, when he's just a little wound up at home, practice this. Say, "Hey, I think your lid is about to flip. What's your antidote? Right, let's tap." Teaching him those skills will be really helpful to him for the rest of his life, since he has a tendency to anxiety. I'm also going to suggest that you start to read some books about anxiety. Lynn Lyons is a great source. She often deals with how to help kids who are hesitant to try something new, and she has a great Facebook page.

Lawrence Cohen, who wrote *Playful Parenting*, which I often recommend. And, of course, laughter is one of the best ways to help kids settle down when they're just getting revved up or when they're carrying around a lot of anxiety. Lawrence Cohen also wrote *The Opposite Of Worry*, which is a really useful book on kids who tend to be more anxious.

And another book that I would recommend on child anxiety is by Tamar Chansky. Tamar Chansky is an anxiety expert with children and has several books out on kids and anxiety. So she's also a good source.

I'm suggesting these books because, clearly, your son does tend toward anxiety. And you're going to want to teach him skills that he can use for the rest of his life to manage the anxiety.

And, of course, you can also help your child diminish their anxiety by allowing them to express emotions and by helping them with those emotions. It's when we stuff emotions, when we feel that some part of ourselves is not acceptable, that we develop more anxiety. It's like that shadow side to ourselves, we're worried it's going to come out and so we're always trying to keep our emotional backpacks under wraps. And that makes us more anxious.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So one of the reasons there's an epidemic of child anxiety is because we don't allow emotions and accept emotions and help kids learn that they can have any emotion that

they have and they still don't have to act on it. And mostly it's because we don't know that ourselves. So, if you have a child with anxiety, pay a lot of attention to emotion coaching and how you deal with emotions in your house. And, of course, use all the peaceful parenting tools that we use to help kids deal with their emotions, like roughhousing, laughter and of course empathy.

Question 22:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:10:07

Our next question is from a parent about her youngest son who's four and likes long cuddles and gets upset about things a lot, and she thinks it's about anxiety and control and there seems to be a lot more backpack unloading to do. This morning he spent an hour screaming, so it's a struggle to meet his needs as well as the other kids in the family. So yes, you're right, the control issues come from anxiety. Most of us get more controlling in an effort to manage our own anxiety, so we try to control the environment. You don't say whether he starts to cry after he does this hour-long screaming. Of course, that's the goal you want. That's how the backpack gets emptied.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And of course, laughter is your most important tool with a child who's anxious or a child who needs to empty their backpack. It will allow him to get to the point with the backpack where he's willing to cry instead of screaming and lashing out. So it's critical to do that laughing as much as you can, not at the moment when he's upset of course, but at other times of the day.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I hear you're doing some great things with him, lots of cuddling, letting him serve himself at the table. That diminishes his fear that he's not going to get his needs met. I know he's a twin. You said you think this is about his role in the family. Since he's the youngest, that's already a role, but he shares it with his twin. If his twin's a girl, then he's the youngest boy, so that should help him feel unique if not necessarily powerful. But if his twin's a boy, then I really would urge you to read up on twins and do some

work to help them develop separate identities so they each feel valued on their own rather than as twins.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And of course, anything you can do to maintain a routine that feels predictable to him will diminish the anxiety. I love your idea of a routine book. And anxiety is fear and special time is going to be essential to him since some of this fear on his part is about whether his needs will get met. So I love that you play pirates and he gets to be the captain. Anytime you can put him in charge of anything in your family, that would be good for him because it makes him feel like A) he can get his needs met and B) he's important and has an important role in the family. Anything he can do to have a special role will be helpful to him. So I think your son may always tend toward being a bit anxious, but the preventive maintenance tools should diminish that anxiety and help him to manage it, and please use the other tools we've talked about, the books and how to talk with your son as well about his anxieties to help him manage them.

Question 23:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:12:41

Our next question is from a parent who says, "My daughter who's five has a sense of misplaced power. She has to be in charge. She has trouble making friends because of it, but she gets sad when no one will play with her, but she's so bossy."

So I want to say it's very common for four year olds to be bossy as you're describing. Usually by the time they're five, they start to be a bit more able to compromise with their friends and she's a little behind the curve on that. To directly address that social issue, please read the letter on the Aha! Parenting website, "4 Year Old Bossy"

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/ask-the-doctor-1/4-year-old-bossy-social-conflicts>

That's about social conflicts for kids that age and how to teach them to navigate that better. And also, there are a lot of good conflict negotiation skills. The whole second section of my sibling book is on that, which works with peers as well as with siblings.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I would also recommend the book, *It's OK Not to Share* by Heather Shumaker. It is the best book I know of about peer relationships and how to help kids navigate peer relationships. She doesn't specifically deal with the bossy issue, but she gives you so much great language to understand peer relationships in the preschool setting and I think it could be very helpful to you.

And I want to add, you're describing this as more than a social issue. You said your daughter has a misplaced sense of power and needs to be in charge. This is anxiety about getting what she needs; it's just in a specific context with peers. So the more you can help her to learn how to say things to her peers about what she needs, but in a way that doesn't attack those peers, the more confidence she'll gain to be able to relate to her peers in a less bossy manner because she'll still be getting what she needs.

Question 24:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:14:33

Our next question is from a parent who says, "Our five-year-old daughter shows signs of some OCD and demands things to be done in a certain way, will get very angry and aggressive when the order is challenged or altered. I find it tough to always accept her feelings and be understanding without discipline, especially when she's rude and explosive." So yeah, it is hard to be understanding when your child seems to be totally overreacting and rude and explosive and giving you a hard time. But here's the thing, when kids have a very full backpack, they get very demanding. They're struggling to control their emotions, to keep those emotions from rising up. And why do they rise up? You know, to get healed. But when kids feel that happening, they get scared, they get anxious, and they try

to control those feelings by trying to control the people around them. And you know this is true for adults too. You probably know people who are very tightly wound and controlling -- and wouldn't they be different if you could just get them laughing or crying?

Dr. Laura Markham:

So from your description of your daughter, I would say she is indeed anxious. So she manages her fear by trying to control everything around her. It sounds like she's in fight mode a lot of the time to keep those emotions stuffed and what she really needs is a good cry. So if you can create safety, she might actually be brave enough to let those feelings surface.

And as you know, the way to create safety is preventive maintenance. Daily laughter, so important to get kids past that anxiety. Empathy 24/7, special time daily, routines, increase safety. And I know that's part of where you're having a problem -- we'll get to that in a sec. And of course, welcoming emotions, making it safe for her to cry. So all that prep, all that preventive maintenance is what's going to make it possible in the moment for her to cope, when you ask her to handle a change in the routine.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I want to add that you need to understand from her point of view that she gets dysregulated because her sense of safety is compromised when there is a change in the routine. I know it's crazy. Just because you have to skip a bath tonight does not mean that her safety is compromised, but that is what she feels. And she reacts by going into fight or flight, the sympathetic nervous system, and she can no longer really feel connected to you at that point. So the little girl who could have been very loving to you just this morning is suddenly explosive and rude because she thinks she's in danger. And suddenly, since she's in fight or flight, you look like the enemy. And I know that doesn't feel good and I know you want to use discipline and punishment. That is our human impulse. But I think we have to remember that when kids get into fight or flight, when they get dysregulated, when they get triggered, they actually don't have access to their connection, their love for us or even to reason, in the

same way that when **we** get triggered, we say things we do not mean. And she of course is a kid, she's five years old, she's still learning how to regulate herself and her brain is still developing. So when the amygdala says danger, danger, she can't really evaluate that very well because her prefrontal cortex is still under assembly.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Okay, so what do you do in that moment when she demands that things be done in a certain way? You set a limit, a clear, kind, firm limit. "I know, sweetheart, you like it when we always have a bath before bed, like usual. But tonight we were out late for that special occasion and we have to skip bath time tonight. I know that upsets you and we still really need to skip the bath." And then of course, you welcome the meltdown. But here's the thing, if it's late at night and you're skipping the bath because you want to get her into bed quickly, the meltdown doesn't help you do that, obviously. The meltdown does help her offload all those feelings.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But if it were me, I would let her have a short bath rather than go through the meltdown. So just let her have the bath and then set up an opportunity for her to cry at a more convenient time when you can really attend to her upset, when you can be fully present, when you can listen. That's what a scheduled meltdown is. You welcome your child's emotions at a time when you can be fully present to support them rather than continuing to try to talk them out of their emotions and put them off and put them off, and then sooner or later something's going to happen and they're just going to blow. So if you do scheduled meltdowns regularly with a child like this, you'll find she's more flexible at those moments when you really need her to be.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And I want to go back to laughter. It really is your best tool for a kid like this. Anxious kids need laughter and roughhousing every single day. I would say for 20 minutes. That's a lot of minutes, I know, and it's an arbitrary number I admit. But my point is, five minutes of laughter is not sufficient for a kid like this.

The more you can do laughter that dances on the edge of her fears, the more she'll offload all that anxiety that she's carrying around with her and the easier she'll be to live with. You know what I mean, I'm hoping, like a bucking bronco ride that dumps her on the couch where she's shrieking with laughter because on some level she's a little bit worried. "Is daddy going to drop me?" When children are able to confront fear through play, they laugh and they let out all that anxiety. Their body chemistry actually changes so they're not so wound up. The metaphorical way to look at it is that top layer of fear of the emotional backpack gets drained off and therefore they're not as tightly wound. They don't have to control as much, so they find it easier to cry.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So they might bump themselves while you're roughhousing and begin crying or they might get upset later and get angry but then shift into tears more easily than usual. Either way, they can get to the fear that needs to be released more easily without getting stuck in the anger.

And as for disciplining her when she acts like that, I would just say no, you don't need to let her be abusive to you. If she's rude, what you say is, "Wow, you must be so upset to be rude to me like that. What's going on, Sweetie?" "Of course, I'm upset. I need a bath. If you weren't so stupid, you would know that." "Okay, let's take a deep breath. We're going to solve this. We're going to fix this together." And remember, she's in fight or flight, you look like the enemy. So as you take that deep breath, "Sweetheart, look in my eyes, we can do this. I'm right here. You're safe." So later you talk to her about the fact she called you stupid, but at that moment you're just restoring safety.

Question 25:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:21:49

Our next question is from a parent who says, "When I try to set an empathic limit, sometimes, not all the time, she can't handle it, and she ends up biting her hands very hard

or hitting herself. I try to remind her of our house rule, no hitting, but it makes me so sad to see her do it."

Yes. It's so upsetting to see your child hurt herself. It sounds like when you set a limit, she feels bad about herself and she defends against that fear that she's not good enough by getting angry at herself and hurting herself. That's anxiety. It's perfectionism.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So first of all, we want to reduce the anxiety. And remember, kids can be born on the more anxious end of the spectrum, which she probably was. But another reason kids are anxious is if we ask them to stuff their feelings. So many people like you who have been using peaceful parenting since their kids were babies wonder why their kid would have an anxiety issue. But then I ask them, "When they were little, did you allow them to cry? Did you hold them while they cried and let them cry? Or did you always feel like you had to stop them from crying and shush them and soothe them?" Now, I'm not saying you shouldn't soothe a crying baby, you always want to. But there are many times like when a 12 month old falls and hurts her knee that we say, "There, there. It's okay. Don't cry." And that actually, I'm sorry to say, causes anxiety. Because what we're doing is we're asking the child to stuff their feelings. So one thing to keep in mind with your five year old is you'll reduce her anxiety the more you allow her to express her feelings.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Now, how can we stop her from hitting herself? First, be super empathic when you set a limit. Since you say you've been doing peaceful parenting always, it may be that you already do this, but really you're just trying to empathize. "You really wanted X, right? I understand. So you tried to get it yourself. That's really resourceful of you. I'm so impressed, but it's not okay to climb up there, honey. It's dangerous. Next time, just ask me. I'll help you." So what did you just do? You set a limit. You said don't climb up there. It's dangerous. But you didn't do it in a way that she felt criticized. Now, she still might respond with anger at herself, but probably not if you have that kind of attitude.

But if she does get angry at herself, empathize with the anger, but set a limit on hurting herself. "You are hitting yourself. You are so mad. You feel like you did wrong. Sweetheart, no hurting. You're very precious. No hurting your precious self. It's okay to be mad. I see you're worried you did something wrong. But you know what? It's okay to make mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes. Making a mistake is how we learn. When someone makes a mistake, we don't hurt them, we hug them. And then we all work together to make things better. Did you make a mistake? Yay. You get a hug. Let's hug you."

And then finally, I would just say if your daughter shows other signs of anxiety and if hurting herself continues, I would urge you to get some help for her from a therapist who's experienced with anxiety in children. We don't want her to get in the habit of hurting herself in response to her anxiety, even starting this early.

Question 26:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:25:34

A parent asks, "Our three and a half year old daughter gets scared, then angry, and then she shuts down emotionally when she thinks she's made a mistake. So she and a friend were swinging and her friend fell and she didn't realize it. And when we called loudly for her to stop the swing, she panicked, turned her back on everyone and ran away. She did reengage pretty quickly, but she was unable to discuss the situation." So this is very similar to the question that we just answered, where the child responds to mistakes by getting upset and feeling ashamed. In this case, instead of going into the fight response and attacking herself, the child goes into flight and she runs away. And the great news is that you, her parents, were able to get her to reengage pretty quickly. But she still was so upset, she couldn't then discuss the situation. So again, that's perfectionism, fear of making a mistake, and shame, and the antidote to it is to remove the shame. Shame comes from a judgment that we have toward ourselves that says,

"We are so bad, so wrong, that people reject us if they know. No one will love us." That's what shame is.

Dr. Laura Markham:

The problem is that shame is very powerful, and when children are shamed, it can last for decades, the rest of their lives. And shame is a way that we have "disciplined children" for generations. It's been considered a good thing to do, to shame someone, so that they'll behave differently. But shame is never constructive. And I want to say I know that the parents who are asking these questions do not shame their children intentionally and probably not even unintentionally. But I think that when someone is tending to be more anxious, they worry about whether they'll lose love. They're much more vulnerable to feeling like they're bad and wrong and they'll lose your love. So they're always judging themselves, and therefore we want to deal with the anxiety, and I've already talked about the ways to do that.

But we also want to intervene in the self-judgment. We want to teach kids that the way they treat themselves matters, that what their mind is doing is not necessarily telling them the truth. Like when the mind says, "You're bad and wrong and people won't like you because you didn't notice your friend fell off the swing." When that happens, we think it's true when our mind says something. But the mind says all kinds of things that aren't true. It makes judgments against us all the time that are inaccurate.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I think it's very important to introduce children to the idea that the mind does its best to protect us, but it gets worried sometimes about the wrong things. And it scares us into believing things that aren't actually true. So stand up to your mind. Of course, your mind is trying to help you from its perspective, but it's not being helpful. So you say to your mind, "Thank you. Got the message. Go lie down," the same way you would to a dog that is barking about someone who just passed outside your door.

So children need to hear from you about the way the mind works, in casual conversation, ongoing conversation, and

they can even come up with a name for that worrying part of their mind. Maybe they want to call it the worry warrior. "You're worrying and you're being a warrior, but it's time to rest now. Go lie down. I got this." They have to learn to say that to themselves.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So when you say your daughter wasn't able to discuss the situation, and how can you help her be more resilient, I think the resilience comes from knowing she's loved no matter what, and everyone makes mistakes. So you want to use the language that I used to the last question about, "You made a mistake. Time for a hug." And I would really put some energy into helping her to reduce the load of anxiety she's carrying also, because it sounds like that's what's fueling these reactions and the shame that she attaches to any mistake.

Question 27:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:30:02

A parent asks, "Our eight year old has started hitting himself in the head when we ask him to do something he doesn't want to do or when he's facing a time constraint, like starting school. He seems overwhelmed, like his task is too difficult, even something easy like brushing teeth. We have a hard time staying calm and connecting with him at those times, especially because his sister is copying him when she gets frustrated or gets told no. How should we respond and ensure it doesn't become a bad habit? He's feeling shame like he's bad."

Well, I know this is upsetting for you and it's even more upsetting when the one and a half year old copies him. But the most important thing for you to do in these situations is stay calm and connect with your son. That's the only way he's not going to internalize shame. That's because he's in a state of emergency. He's dysregulated, he's overwhelmed. And when someone feels that way, it doesn't go away by you telling them to calm down. It goes away by you **being** calm, radiating calm. Your calm is what gives your child the message that it's not an emergency.

Your calm is what helps your child to regulate. It's called co-regulation. Children learn to regulate from us and they do it in the moment as they're upset. As we're able to stay calm, they co-regulate.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you say, "We have a hard time staying calm and connecting with him at those moments." You know what? He's eight, you're a grownup. You're the parent. I understand it's hard, but it's your job. It is not his job to regulate for you. It's your job to regulate when he gets dysregulated, so he then can learn how to regulate. And when I say learn, it's really not a mental learning. It's more visceral than that. It's actually his limbic system, his emotional system, and his neurology will take shape in response to yours. If you get upset, he'll get more upset. If you can calm yourself at that moment, he will learn to calm himself at that moment.

So this is the only way your son will shift out of his state of emergency -- is your self-regulation. So remind yourself that your one year old has a lot of time to overcome this. Don't worry about her copying him. Remind yourself that your son is not choosing to be upset. He's actually overwhelmed by his own anxiety at this moment.

Dr. Laura Markham:

He needs your help to manage himself, you said through brushing teeth or whatever, these unpleasant tasks. That's a skill he'll need for the rest of his life, managing himself through an unpleasant task. But he needs your help right now, step-by-step, to do it. It might seem unfair to you. A lot of eight year olds could handle what you're asking without a lot of help from parents. But for whatever reason, your son can't. He gets overwhelmed. So stop resenting it and help him learn to self-regulate and manage himself.

And you do that by offering him support. Remember, whenever a child is not doing what we want, we have two choices, punishment and support. And research shows that punishment has all kinds of bad outcomes, including increasing kids' anxiety. And support has all kinds of good

outcomes, including kids learning to regulate themselves and developing a brain that's capable of it.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you step in to support him. "You're feeling overwhelmed by brushing your teeth, it looks like. That's okay, Sweetheart, you can handle this. You're safe. I'm right here." Touch him reassuringly. Keep your voice calm, soothing. If he looks at you sort of frozen like a deer in the headlights and overwhelmed, you say, "That's okay, Sweetie. I'm right here. Okay. What's the first step in brushing your teeth?" "Um, find the toothbrush."

If you can get him laughing, that's a home run because that will help him feel less anxious. But even if you can't get him laughing, just keep talking him through the task. "Great. You've got the toothbrush. Next step?"

Do only as much for him as he needs you to do, but keep offering emotional support. Stay close, reassuring, smiling, cheering him on. As you take this positive attitude, I think you'll see him become less self-critical and less ashamed, and he should stop hitting himself at that point. The hitting comes from your feeling like he's bad and wrong, and he's expressing that he feels bad and wrong. When we feel like our kid is bad and wrong, believe me, even if we don't say those words, even if we don't tell them, they always pick up how we feel.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So children who are hitting themselves are expressing a judgment against themselves. You heard me talk about that to the earlier question, and I think your frustration with him is now being expressed in him punishing himself by hitting himself. Luckily, you can change this. You can heal this with him. And the way to do that is preventive maintenance, lots and lots of laughter to reduce the anxiety.

And again, if he shows other signs of anxiety, you might want to have him evaluated. If he gets that overwhelmed just from brushing his teeth at the age of eight, it may be that he's getting overwhelmed in school also. And having him evaluated will allow you to give him the tools he

needs so that he can function better at school and his self-esteem will stay intact. He is already eight and he deserves to get help before he gets to the preteen years.

Question 28:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:36:09

Our next question is from a parent who says, "Our strong-willed almost five year old has had a lot of medical appointments in the past year. He now refuses to get dressed and clings fiercely to me at daycare drop-off and at bedtime. I'm good at staying calm and expressing empathy, but I feel like I'm not helping him out of this."

What we have to remember is that little kids perceive medical procedures as a form of torture. They're held down and their bodies are powerless and they're subjected to pain. And naturally, they get some trauma from that. And it sounds like your child is very upset from the medical appointments, you don't say what they were. But I think we know it's traumatic because he's showing you that by needing to cling to you to feel safe.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So it's great that you're able to stay calm and express empathy, but you're right that he's not getting past this trauma by himself apparently. He needs help to feel safe again, and until he feels safe again, he can't rise to the normal developmental tasks of a five year old. So it is important to do the work, as your intuition is telling you I hear.

So it's possible you can do this work with him yourself. I would immediately buy a doctor kit if you don't have one. Let him be the doctor and subject you to medical treatments. You can use stuffed animals to act out medical scenarios where he, your son, can rescue the stuffed animals from the medical treatment. There's a great description of doing this at the beginning of Peter Levine's book, *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids*. So I would definitely get your hands on that and read it. You can also try regular games that are designed to help him work through his fear

by laughing. So notice anything that makes him laugh, do more of that, no matter how silly it is. The more giggling, the better, to help him get out all that fear.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I would also do games that are specifically designed to help him through separation. So for instance, there's an article on the Aha! Parenting website. The title is "2 Year Old Sleep Anxiety Following Separation from Mother".

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/ask-the-doctor-1/2-year-olds-sleep-anxiety-following-separation-from-mother>

So I know that's a younger child, but the games that are described in that article will work great with a five year old and will help him feel better about separating from you.

Now, he doesn't just have separation anxiety, he has medical anxiety, which is why we started with those games and with the sense of powerlessness that usually goes along with medical procedures. And I would add that the regular peaceful parenting tools are designed to help kids work through whatever comes up. So if you're doing special time with him and you're letting him take the lead, he is likely to engage you in some sort of play that will be a little repetitive as he tries to work through the fear and powerlessness that he felt when he was subject to the medical trauma.

Dr. Laura Markham:

The other thing that will really help him is making a book about his very bad year. So there's an article on the Aha! Parenting website, "Helping Kids Heal from Trauma by Making a Book", and it's about a boy who's had medical trauma. And the reason to do a book like this is it helps him to rationally understand what happened, because it integrates the two sides of the brain. He has this experience of trauma, upset emotions, pain and terror. And you can help the other side of the brain to tell a coherent story about that, see the story differently, and very important, have a happy ending. The ending is vitally important in how we process an event. So you don't want this to define his life. So this is not just a book about him, but it's a book about the year he had the operation or the

year that there were a lot of medical tests or whatever you want to call it.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I think you'll find the article really helpful and make sure you have a happy ending about his body being healed and that sometimes he still feels worried or scared when he thinks about it, but he knows he can always talk to you and you will always understand. And every day, he feels a little better and a little braver. So you're acknowledging he has lingering feelings, but you're showing him a path to deal with those feelings.

And then when you read him the book, be aware he's going to have some big feelings. He may get angry when he reads it. He may be fascinated and want to read it over and over again. He may start to cry. All those things might happen, and that's good. That means you're getting into the trauma and you're helping him work it out. I think when you begin reading him this book, and having real discussions where you empathize about what happened, resist the urge to say, "Oh, but it was medically necessary," because, of course, it was or you wouldn't have done it. But he still felt what he felt.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But I think when you begin reading and talking, and following his lead in special time, and watch what he starts working on, and when you begin doing a lot of roughhousing around separation, the games I mentioned, and just about fear in general, and when you begin playing a lot of doctor with that doctor kit, and acting out scenarios with stuffed animals, and he rescues the animals -- I think you'll see that he will be fascinated and really want to play these games, and he will laugh long and hard, and I bet you'll see him start to cry more.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I don't know at this point that he's really crying about the trauma. It seems that when you peel him off you at daycare, he cries because he's terrified. But he's not empowered in those situations. And I think he may not actually be getting to the deep work that needs to be done. I think you can get to that through play. So try all this and see how he responds. You should see within a

month that he will separate from you a little more easily, and he will probably talk more readily about what happened.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And if you don't see pretty quick results as I'm describing, I would take him to an expert who can help him work through the trauma. I have often recommended someone who is skilled in working with kids using EMDR, because research does show EMDR is helpful in trauma. But the other work that I've been reading research on lately that's been very impressive is somatic experiencing.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Somatic experiencing is based on Peter Levine's work. I mentioned his book, *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids*, earlier in this comment. So look for someone in your community who has real training in somatic experiencing, especially with children. And I think you'll find that they will help your son pretty quickly to be back to his normal, confident, happy self.

Question 29:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:43:12

This parent's question is about her spirited three-year-old who, "Has anxiety and wants constant attention. His aggression comes out the second I move my attention to nurse the baby, et cetera. And he needs us to sit for an hour to help him fall asleep, and he wakes multiple times. Challenging behavior happens when we move our attention away, and he follows us around."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So first of all, how great, it sounds like you were really using the peaceful parenting tools. You're welcoming his tears. You're doing special time. You're getting him laughing. I want to say that this sounds very related to the baby. Now, maybe he was very high-needs before the baby came. And we know that a high-needs kid gets worse when they have a sibling, meaning they make the worst adjustment to a sibling being added to the family. Because, in fact, they have more needs that they need

met, and the sibling does stop them from getting their needs met.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You say he needs you to sit for an hour to fall asleep and he wakes multiple times. That's something that you can address. It will take a little time. In fact, it might take a few months, and it will involve tears as he confronts his fears. But you won't ever leave him alone, which would traumatize him. Instead, you'll help him face his fear of you leaving him to sleep alone. One step at a time.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I think it's a really good idea for you to help him learn to fall asleep in his own bed without you in it. And that would mean he will stop waking up at night. That will help you feel less overwhelmed by his constant neediness. And I think it will also give him an opportunity to cry about separation from you in a safe way, in the context of learning to sleep by himself.

Dr. Laura Markham:

This is all described in an article on the Aha! Parenting website called "Helping Your Toddler Learn to Put Himself to Sleep."

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/ages-stages/toddlers/helping-your-toddler-learn-to-put-himself-to-sleep>

You can also check the preschooler sleep article, but the toddler one has the step-by-step version that will be really helpful to you. So, the reason to do that is that it will help your son work through some of his separation issues, and it will help him sleep, both of which sound really important to you.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But what about his aggression the minute you sit down to nurse the baby? I have an article on this on the Aha! Parenting website. It's a blog post, actually. It's called "Enforcing Limits When Your Child Ignores You".

https://www.ahaparenting.com/blog/When_the_3_Year_Old_Hits_the_Baby

And it's specifically about what happens when mom sits down to nurse the baby and the three-year-old gets aggressive. So I think the article will help, but we also need to look at the fact that he's constantly following you around.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I think this is evidence of his feeling really insecure about your love because of the one-year-old. And if he did act like this before the baby came, meaning following you around, it's just evidence of high needs. Since then, he has some questions about whether his needs will get met. So I think it's really important, if you haven't already, that you read my sibling book -- the last section, which is all about welcoming the new baby, and the first year with the new baby. The rest of the book will be helpful also, but that section I have found is invaluable for avoiding situations like you're in, and also addressing them, ameliorating them to some degree, even though your son already has internalized worry about the fact that there's a baby in the family and he's not going to get his needs met.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, I would really work with him on feeling like your love is there for him no matter what. And no matter how much love the baby gets, there's more than enough for him. And when he follows you around, you're delighted to interact with him because, of course, you adore him, and you delight in him. I think often when kids are anxious and follow us around and need us as much as your son needs you, it's easy to feel like they're a bottomless pit.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But if we can shift gears to instead feel grateful for our child and to delight in him and to cultivate delight even when he's following us around, and we're trying to get something done, what often happens is that the child really settles into a secure sense that, "It's okay. My parents are here for me no matter what."

Question 30:

- Dr. Laura Markham: 01:47:36 The next question is very similar. "My daughter has been following me when I leave a room in our house at night and in someone else's house day or night. We lie down with her until she falls asleep at night. Otherwise, she's too scared to sleep. She has no trouble going to preschool or taking a nap there. Should I be worried that she's afraid to be by herself? She's four and a half."
- Dr. Laura Markham: So, the great news is she is able to go to preschool by herself and to nap there. So I would say she feels safe at preschool. Yay! And yes, I would say that not feeling comfortable being by herself in a room, well, a lot of four-year-olds are that way. But she's following you. That sounds to me like she interrupts what she's doing to go after you when you go to the bathroom or something.
- Dr. Laura Markham: And that is probably an indicator of separation anxiety. And then you say you have to lie with her at night or she's too scared to sleep. Now, again, that's very normal for four-year-olds. Human beings are not designed to sleep alone, biologically speaking. We're designed to sleep with others. So while many kids do learn to sleep by themselves pretty easily, others need to be "taught."
- Dr. Laura Markham: So, as I said to the previous question, please go to the website and look under toddlers and sleep, and also preschoolers and sleep. Both articles will apply to your four-year-old, even though you might think the toddler article would not. It does. And I think you'll find that as you help your daughter to work through her fears of sleeping by herself, she will also gain confidence in being in a room by herself.
- Dr. Laura Markham: A lot of that separation anxiety will fall by the wayside. I think what's different about your daughter than the previous question is, you don't have another child in the house. It's true she follows you around, but at daycare she's fine. So I would say there's something going on here about you and separation anxiety, and the sleep work that

you're about to do with her I think will make a big difference in that.

Question 31:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:49:49

Our next question is from a parent who says that her daughter, who is 11 and a half, tends to be very anxious in general, and they've had professional help for over a year because she had some anxiety about vomiting. That's actually very common for kids who are anxious, to have anxiety about vomiting. And that's great that you already had treatment for her. And I'm hoping that the therapy that she was in taught her something about how anxiety works, and taught her skills to manage herself when she feels anxious.

Dr. Laura Markham:

It sounds like there is still some residue here, though, because she still gets quite agitated at the idea of being sick. And so her parents are a little concerned about what happens when she gets her period.

So, your daughter does have anxiety about her body. So I can see why you're worried about what will happen when she gets her period, especially since she has shut down any discussions you've tried to have with her about this.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But I want to say that getting your period is very different than getting sick. A body positive view would say this is the most exciting thing that could happen to a young person. It's an indicator that when she's ready, she'll be able to have a baby. And there's nothing, to me, more sacred, more exciting, more astonishing for a human being to experience.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, our culture devalues children and devalues women, and devalues childbirth -- there's an old joke that if men menstruated it would be a sacrament. So yes, we have a society that does not necessarily value this. And there's even some embarrassment attached to it in our culture. So, I think that starting with body positivity would be really

important. And give yourself a way to have these conversations with her because most adults are uncomfortable initiating discussions.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, get your hands on a good book. *The Period Book* is the one I would recommend. It's by Karen Gravelle. And I would not just leave it in her room. I would give it to her and say that you want to talk about it. And I think she'll find it fascinating and read it, and you can start talking about it. If you think it's going to just disappear and she'll say, "Oh no, I don't know where it is. I lost it," then start reading it with her.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Read it a little bit at night together when she's getting ready for bed, snuggle up with her, read a little bit of it, and I think you'll find that she's so excited and interested in the book because it's a great book, that she'll keep reading it even without you. But that will give you a way to begin to talk with her. I think if you read the Amazon reviews of the book, you'll see confirmation of this that girls like this book so much that they're often willing to have conversations with their parents about what they're reading.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So that immediate intervention will frame this change in her body in a positive way that will make her more likely to look forward to it. Now, it's still true that it's something that you're not in control of. And when humans are anxious about their bodies, they like to be in control. But it will really help to have the framing be that this is an exciting, wonderful thing that she is getting to experience rather than something that is happening to her that is out of her control.

Dr. Laura Markham:

At the same time, I would start to work with her on her anxiety in general. I think the fact that she still gets very worried about being sick is an issue. I recommend Lynn Lyons. She has a great Facebook page, and I know she's done a lot of work on anxiety about vomiting because when I've heard her speak, she's talked about that.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, I would check out her books, but I would also look on her website or on her Facebook page, see if you can find one of those videos about vomiting. The great thing about her is she's very funny, and she loves kids. So she makes videos for the kids she works with, and I think those videos can be great to show kids. I think your daughter would actually really appreciate them.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I would really begin to work with your daughter on overcoming her anxiety. It's anxiety. It's going to be there. She may never get over her tendency to be anxious about her body, but she can get skills to work with it, and she can learn that she doesn't have to be subject to that anxiety. That just because her mind is telling her there's something dangerous about vomiting, for instance, or being sick in general, that it's not true. That (vomiting) is your body's way of taking care of itself and overcoming illness. That's her body's strength. Don't believe what your mind is telling you. I think that's a really critical thing for any kid who's anxious to learn. And I think Lynn Lyons is probably a great place for your daughter to start learning that.

Question 32:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:55:30

Two parents have a question about their seven year old who they say doesn't pay a lot of attention to what you say to him and really needs to be focused on, and he especially seeks his mother's attention. Plus he can get extremely angry if he feels he's not in control, or is being asked to do things. Maybe he feels pushed around, I'm wondering.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, looking for his mother's attention might be about anxiety, that he finds that she helps him regulate. Anxiety also might explain some of his inability to focus on what you're saying to him. And in fact, it might explain some of his getting angry when he feels he's not in control. Those are all signs of anxiety. Now, he may, in fact, be diagnosable as ADHD, as having ADHD. But it's also entirely possible that he has some anxiety. And it's also

possible that he's on the spectrum because anxiety often coexists when kids are on the spectrum. One of the things they are challenged by is often anxiety.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, I would say the answer is the same as for other kids with anxiety, which is they really, really, really need to laugh. And I would say the answer for the attention from his mother is the same, which is one on one time every single day is really important for him. In addition to that, getting his attention when you're speaking to him would mean really getting in his face in a friendly way, not trying to talk to him from across the room. Go over to him, put your hand on his arm, touch him, make eye contact, and only then would you ask him to do something, or ask him a question.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And his tendency to get angry, I think you'd want to give him control when you could so he feels less pushed around. And again, back to backpack emptying. So I would encourage you to really listen to all of the things I've said about aggression and emotions and anxiety because they all will help you to see his behavior in a fresh way, and to see what you can do to help him with it.

Question 33:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:57:52

This is about a six-year-old who's uncomfortable when she meets new people, and holds mom so tight, or even bites mom, or starts pulling on her own lips when she meets a new person. And this can be even a child at the playground or something. And at home she's completely normal. And when she gets familiar with this stranger she's friends with them and she's fine.

So this is social anxiety. The way to handle social anxiety, one, laughter before any social activity. Before you go to the park. Laughter so she doesn't have pent up anxiety and she can handle the new anxiety of the social situation better. She'll have more resources. I would also talk to her at a safe time about this issue. "Sometimes you get a little

worried when you meet new people. That's normal. Most people do.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But you know what? Then when you get to know them, you like being with them. Like with so and so who you met and you were worried at first, but then you got to be friends. I think you feel safe that you can enjoy just being friends. But when you first meet them, you're a little bit worried, right? So it's okay to be worried, but you don't have to be worried. That's just your brain trying to protect you. It's being a little over-protective."

Dr. Laura Markham:

"So it doesn't mean you don't want to meet new friends and try new things. So what could help you feel safer when you meet someone new? When your mind says, 'Oh, oh, danger, danger. That's a new person'? What could you say to your mind to settle your mind down so it wouldn't get so upset?" So this is an important concept to teach kids too. That just because their mind is telling them that it's an emergency, it doesn't mean it's actually an emergency.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So this is true even for adults. Most adults think that if their mind thinks something, it's true. But in fact, half the stuff that goes through your mind is not true. Your brain is just ... No, not your brain. Your mind is just trying to protect you. And of course, it is your brain, but it's your mind just trying to protect you. And you can stand up against that and say, "Oh no, no, you don't have to respond to this as if it's an emergency."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So that was during a calm moment, you might have that discussion with her. But then before you actually go to the park or a new activity, remind her about this. "Remember how we talked about this, that sometimes you get a little worried when you meet new people? It's normal to feel that way, Sweetie. Everybody does. But you know what? You don't have to listen to your worry. Remember you said that it would make you feel safer if we did X?" Whatever it is. "Let's remember to do that. When you feel a little worried, you give me a signal. You squeeze my hand. That's our signal. And then when you signal me that you're a little worried, guess what I'm going to do? I'm going to

give you a big hug and then we're going to start laughing together somehow, and then we'll go and we'll see who's at the park that we could play with."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you're basically giving her tools to have you on her side, so she feels safer because you're protecting her, and communicate with you. And then to actually shift her mood, because you can't have laughter and fear in the same moment in your mind and body. So remember, if we can make her feelings conscious and help her feel like she can handle them, then she doesn't have to act them out by pulling at her lips or whatever in ways that are socially embarrassing or that are problems for her.

Question 34:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:01:16

A parent is saying that her six-year-old is very shy in public, and reluctant to participate in activities because she worries that she won't know what to do. How can I increase her self-confidence?

Well, you're not going to change her temperament, which is that she's a highly sensitive kid. You described her as that, and slow to warm in new environments. So your goal here is to help her learn how to navigate the world.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, start talking about how she might feel, and what she can do to feel safer and more comfortable, like at a birthday party or some other new situation, and acknowledge her worries. Don't ridicule them. Don't dismiss them. Acknowledge them. But point out that there have been times in the past that she has overcome those fears and ended up enjoying herself.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So with social anxiety like this, one helpful approach is to just accept it as a part of normal life that most people feel, and reassure yourself that you're okay anyway, and give yourself tools to manage it. So one great tool is to focus on other people instead of yourself. So you can remind your kid that she can just ask other kids questions and listen to

their answers. And then she doesn't have to feel anxious, like the spotlight's on her and she's uncomfortable.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And you could actually work on a situation that makes her anxious. Like if she's going to go to a birthday party and she's worried about it, you can ask her. "So if you feel nervous at the party today, what could you do to make yourself more comfortable?" So one idea if she doesn't come up with it is to hang out with a kid she knows from school. If she doesn't know any of the kids, she probably knows the birthday girl and she's can hang out with the birthday girl. Another thing is that she could go offer to help the hostess with something, the birthday kid's parents. She could offer to help with the refreshments or something.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And you could ask her, "Well, what could you do?" And sometimes kids who are socially more challenged don't know how to enter a situation while other kids are playing. And the best way to do that is to observe what's happening, and then ask what she could do that's part of it. So if the other kids at the birthday party are all doing something like playing a certain game, she could say, "Oh, it looks like you're playing house. Are you playing house?" And they'll go, "Yeah." And she can say, "Who's your mom? Who's the dad? Who's the baby? What can I do?"

Children exclude others from play because they don't want to break the flow of the play. So acknowledging to them that you understand what's happening and that you're willing to fit into a role that you're assigned is a really helpful way to get into a social situation. And I would practice these things also. Meaning, don't have her avoid the parties no matter how anxious she is. She needs to practice so that she can tolerate the anxiety, and also have some good experiences overcoming it.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And that's really the answer to the last part of your question about self confidence. Experience. The more experience, the more confident she'll be that she can handle things. So when you think about it, fear is the worry that you won't be able to handle something. So

when you learn you can handle something, you feel more confident. You don't feel that fear. There's a wonderful book called *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. It's the best book on fear I've ever read. It's by Susan Jeffers. It's very old. It's been around a long time, and you can get it for pennies on Amazon, probably. *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I think that's a really helpful book if you have a child who struggles with anxiety. Most of the time children who struggle with anxiety have parents who struggle with anxiety. So it's either you or your partner. So it can be really helpful to read a book like that and to learn how to work with your child and your own issues. There's also an article on my website called "13 Tips to Support Your Socially Worried Child". So, for the parents that had asked about social anxiety, I would highly recommend that article. It's a good place to start.

Question 35:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:05:16

Here's another social anxiety question from a parent who says, "My three-year-old shows signs of social anxiety. My husband has it as well. Current struggles are things like if a kid bumps him at the playground, he'll insist on going home. Or if he's saying goodbye to someone, he'll distract himself in order to avoid acknowledging that the person's leaving. How do I help him be self aware without imposing a label on him?"

Dr. Laura Markham:

You never need a label to talk about his worries. You talk about the worries just as I've described in the last two answers. And you can also give him words for what he's feeling. And you can acknowledge his experience. So if he gets bumped at the playground and he wants to go home, his brain is telling him he can't protect himself. He doesn't feel safe.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you would say that. And once you talk to him about that directly, he won't feel so scared because he'll

understand better what's happening. You can also do puppet shows to play with those scenarios so that he sees good ways to handle the scenario, and also so he laughs about it, which helps. It would be less loaded, it helps reduce the tension. Play is also a great way to prepare for goodbyes and to practice goodbyes.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I would make a game out of every goodbye you can, as often as you can in your family so that he gets used to goodbyes and can handle them better.

The research shows that if we allow kids to avoid the things that scare them, or if we as adults, avoid the things that scare us, we get more scared.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And in fact, fear has a way of mushrooming and filling any space in our lives. Because once we start believing that voice of fear that's trying to protect us, and we don't stand up to it, then it says, "Okay, I've protected you from bumps at the playground. Now, let's protect you from ever going to a birthday party because you never know what might happen there. And we'll just act like we're really scared of birthday parties because we are and we'll get your mom to never let you go to birthday parties because you're too scared." And then the next thing is they won't be able to go to school.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So the problem is that there's no amount of protection that fear is going to find sufficient to protect you. So for fear, no amount of protection is ever enough. But for love, no amount of protection is necessary. Fear is the ultimate contraction. Love is the ultimate expansion. When we feel loved and connected, we have backup. We can handle things. And as I said, fear can't coexist in the same place as laughter. Laughter is about wellbeing. It's about connection.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So, if you can help your child to overcome the fear, to do something that scares them, then the fear can't get that foothold. And if your child feels like they have backup from you to help them figure out how to handle it, then they can manage the thing that scares them. Feel the fear and

do it anyway. And remember, fear is just thinking you can't handle something. That's what fear is.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Ultimately, when you think about it, whatever you're afraid of, maybe you're afraid of public speaking. That's one of the number one fears, or maybe you're afraid of airplanes. But the fear is that you won't be able to handle it. I won't be able to handle it when I get on stage. I won't be able to handle it when I get on that airplane. And actually, when you actually do it, worst case scenario, you're going to be fine. Whatever it is. Your audience will be rooting for you. The airplane is going to be fine.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So whatever your child is afraid of, actually they're going to be fine. It's their fear that they can't handle it. And that's why you help them think things through in advance, but you help them do the thing. Give the kid the message that it's okay to feel a fear. That's normal. They can expect to.

So if we're saying to kids, "Oh, you won't feel afraid. Don't worry." That's not going to help them. They're going to feel afraid, and then they're going to want to run home and hide. So if you say to the kid, "It's normal to feel the fear when you go to that sleepover or to that birthday party, that's normal. Don't worry. It's okay to feel that way. What can you do to help yourself through it? Because you remember when you feel afraid, your body is going to be telling you, 'You have to run home,' but that's not even true. You'll be able to handle it. How can you help yourself handle it? What will you do if you're scared?" Right?

Dr. Laura Markham:

I used to do this with my daughter before sleepovers. "What will you do if you get scared? What will you do if you wake up in the middle of the night and I'm not around?" And she would think through what to do. Sometimes she didn't go to sleepovers because she didn't trust the parents to take care of her emotionally. But other times she would say, "Oh, well Hannah's mom, Sally, she loves me. She'll take care of me." Right? So she was totally fine. So they just need to know that they have a plan and it's okay that they feel the fear.

Question 36:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:10:05 Here's a question from a parent about her six-year-old who is socially anxious. She needs the experience that the world is safe and particularly that other kids are safe. So you want to give her frequent experiences with other children, where she has a wonderful time being wild, running around with them, and that will help her be more confident.

Dr. Laura Markham: I think it's hard to probably to give her that experience since she is inhibited, but the more you can figure that out and pay attention to that, the better. And I would also read some books with her about social anxiety. There's a book by Claire Freeland called *What To Do When You Feel Too Shy: A Kid's Guide To Overcoming Social Anxiety*. And I think it starts around age six so I think you could do it with her.

Dr. Laura Markham: And it's a great book because it has a worksheet in every chapter, that helps open a conversation between you and your daughter about what social anxiety is. And I would also, before she does any kind of interaction with other kids, I would always get her laughing, which lowers the amount of anxiety loading that she's going into the situation with.

Question 37:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:11:13 This parent's five-year-old is very anxious because the transition into kindergarten has created anxiety. "She's excited about a birthday party, but then she's too shy to go in and it's really hard for her to go in and eventually she does." So that's great. So I say how great she was eventually able to go in. She does it in her own way, in her own time, and she's fine when you aren't there. That's good. She's going to gain confidence.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I do think the book I just mentioned, Freeland's book, is going to help her learn that it's okay to feel as she does, but there are things she can do to help herself feel more confident. The good news is that she wants to go into the birthday party, so she's already halfway there. And you're going to give her tools to help her manage her anxiety and help her be able to talk back to the anxiety and defeat it. And good to intervene now while she's only five, instead of waiting.

Question 38:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:12:03

Our next question is from a parent who says, "My five-year-old has always been very shy, passive anxious. Just before his fifth birthday, he started changing his mood in a second, having big cries. He's suffering socially as he doesn't want to play with other kids alone."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you say, this is just in the past year. I notice you also have a baby who's a year old. So I'm wondering if this is connected. Now also there's social anxiety, clearly. He doesn't want to play with other kids alone. And maybe in the past year he started school? So it sounds to me that just before his fifth birthday there was a change, and whatever that change was has really worsened anxiety that was probably already there.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you say that you play with him about his fears. You have special time and you work on connection, but it's getting worse. So first of all, for the social anxiety where he doesn't want to play with other kids alone, I wouldn't have him play alone. I would be there with him for now. But make sure that at least a little of every play date, you are not in the room.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Gradually he should be able to go for longer and longer without you in the room, and you will have to work with him on warning him. So in advance you explain that you'll need to step out of the house to make a phone call and you'll be right there and he can see you from the window.

And when he cries about that, in advance, you help him with those fears.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And at the moment when you go to do it, he may fall apart and follow you outside, but luckily you don't really have a phone call. So you can hold him outside and again, help him with those fears and then you go right back into the play date. So if you make a habit of doing that, you'll find that he will start to get through those fears.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Now if he stays socially anxious, then I would not mess around here. I would take him to an anxiety specialist because he's, as you say, already suffering socially because he's having a hard time rising to the normal age appropriate developmental task of being able to play alone with other kids.

Question 39:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:14:18

The next question is from a parent who says, "I'm an early years educator working from home. My daughter is four. When I do settling sessions for new children, she seems to get very anxious about adults she doesn't know in the house. She's fine with the kids. She gets hyper and silly, starts pushing boundaries. If I try to stop her, she screams, shouts, tries to bite me and hit me in the face. I know this is anxiety driven. It disappears if she knows the person well. It only happens with new adults. As a child, I learned to mask and cover up my anxiety with loud babble and silliness and I still get that urge as an adult."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I think you're right that this is anxiety and she gets silly and hyper and pushes boundaries because she's anxious with a new adult in her home. And then when you stop her and try to set a limit, she screams, shouts, hits you in the face, bites you, because the anxiety is now full-fledged fear and she doesn't know how else to handle it, if she's not allowed to get silly.

Dr. Laura Markham: In fact, she's pushing the limits, pushing the boundaries, I think because she needs help with the fear, which is what anxiety is, fear. And she doesn't know what to do and so she's trying to get your help. The problem of course, is that at that moment you can't really be fully her mother. You're busy doing the settling sessions for new children and you're attending to those adults.

Dr. Laura Markham: So you're trying to do something professionally that is part of your job, but that is guaranteed to bring up anxiety on the part of your daughter. When she gets hyper and silly and pushes limits, when you try to set a limit and she screams and shouts and bites you and hits you, I imagine those parents want to walk right out of there and take their kids home. Right?

Dr. Laura Markham: It doesn't sound like this is a very good set up for you to do this professional work, with your daughter there. So yes, you do want to work with your daughter on her anxiety. And you've heard everything else I've said about anxiety in all these last bunch of questions, and I urge you to put all of that into effect. But I'm also going to say this: your daughter is responding to strange adults in the house by getting anxious and yes, she will learn. She's only four. She will learn that it's not an emergency, over time. And so you do want to keep exposing her to that situation. But I think you should not have her be at home when these strange adults come on a regular basis.

Dr. Laura Markham: For most four-year-olds it's not a normal thing to constantly have strange adults in their home. Right? You're already asking a great deal from her, to allow all these children in her house. And it sounds like she's doing fine with that, which is wonderful. But I would have a sitter take her away from your house. Somebody you trust, somebody who you have gotten to know with her well, so that she trusts that person and wants to leave and go off with them and get an ice cream or do something special. I would send her out of the house when you do these settling sessions. Because you're asking too much from her at this time when she's only four. She's going to go into anxiety and yes, you can help her with the anxiety and I

think in another year this won't be an issue. She'll have learned that it's really not an emergency. And you can titrate it. You can do it in small amounts. But I wouldn't have these sessions at your house with her there for now. Give it some time and work with her on her anxiety first.

Question 40:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:18:09 This question is about a three-year-old who does not want to be left by mom, but this is a new thing going on since December. So whenever it's new, we want to know what's happened in a child's life to cause this recently. And in this case, the way this parent describes it, this is a build up of trauma. These may be smallish traumas, but they're still traumas. Things like dad having surgery, and starting preschool, and the child was quite ill, and these were all one thing after another.

Dr. Laura Markham: But it started interestingly enough with the holidays. So I just want to say this isn't the first time I've heard this, that the holidays can be anxiety producing for kids. We don't really know why this is and in fact I've never seen research on it. It's just an anecdotal observation, but it might be a change in routine. It might be that there's some guy coming down your chimney into your house, eating your cookies. I don't know.

Dr. Laura Markham: It might be the idea that the child could be judged and found to be not good enough. My three year old boy said to me, "But Mommy, doesn't Santa Claus love everyone?" He couldn't get the idea that this old guy was in charge of deciding whether children were good or bad. And of course I didn't teach my son that, but that's what he was learning from other kids. He was astonished that this person could have so much power over children's lives.

Dr. Laura Markham: So we don't know why this parent's son is anxious, but this happened, then he got very sick -- and when you're ill it always triggers attachment behavior, meaning seeking someone to take care of you. Then his dad had surgery.

Maybe he's a super sensitive kid who picks up on the anxieties of the adults around him. But for three-year-olds, it's normal to have issues about body integrity. That's developmentally normal. That's why three-year-olds often are quite upset if there's a toy soldier with a broken leg or something, it bothers them a great deal.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And then of course after this, her son started preschool and he got distressed. So they pulled him out of preschool, which I think was a very good idea. So this parent describes the things she's doing: validating, connecting, using rituals, that's fantastic. And power scenarios in play. That's also great if you're saying that you put him in charge of your leaving, and you play with that and get him laughing. I'm not sure really what you mean, but I think that's what you mean.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I would also say, you want to be sure he's bonded with anyone you leave him with, because he has been traumatized around security issues, attachment issues. So it's okay for him to protest when you leave and to be worried about it, but tell him the story. "I'm going to leave. You might miss me and be sad, but so-and-so is going to take care of you and hold you and help you feel better. It's okay to miss me. You can handle that with help from so-and-so. I'll be back after lunch and we'll play your favorite game together." It will help if you get him laughing before you go out, so he empties his backpack.

And then I would actually try to get to the root of the trauma. I would use dolls to act out a scenario with him where you say, "This little boy is scared. He's scared to have his mommy go. Oh no. What should we do?"

Dr. Laura Markham:

And as you're acting out the mom saying, "Goodbye" and the boy being upset and he'll say, "Don't let her go." And it's fine to have him give orders or even take charge of the doll who's him. And by the way, it wouldn't have his name, it would be the baby elephant or something. But let him take charge of the (play) situation.

- Dr. Laura Markham: And maybe he rescues his dad if his dad is having surgery and he takes care of his dad. Maybe he keeps mommy from leaving, whatever. Those are the things he wanted to do but was powerless to do. So those things will help him to release the trauma that he's holding in his body, from feeling powerless in the face of life.
- Dr. Laura Markham: And then there's a final thing that I'd suggest. I call it the goodbye game. You don't actually leave, but you start to leave, but you do it in a way that you can't handle leaving and you come back to the kids and you say, "Hey, let's play the goodbye game or the bye-bye game! Let's pretend I'm leaving." And you put on your jacket, but instead of going to the front door, you walk into the closet. I even think the closet, the coat closet is better than the bathroom, because then it's obviously silly to them. Even a three year old knows you're not going to hang out in the closet. You might hang out in the bathroom, so the closet is better.
- Dr. Laura Markham: So as you start to go into the closet, or even before you get to the closet door, you say to your child, "If you want me back, don't worry. You can get me back. You can have a magic word. What magic word should be our magic word?" And your kid will come up with a magic word. So let's say the magic word's abracadabra. You say, "So you can say, 'Abracadabra' if you want me back and I will come back."
- Dr. Laura Markham: But as you go toward the closet, your child is looking at you with some worry on his face like, wow, you're going to disappear in the closet. Suddenly turn around and yell the magic word, "Abracadabra" and run over and throw yourself onto your child and hug him and kiss him and say, "Oh, I just couldn't leave. I want to be with you. I never want to be apart from you" and laugh at your need for him.
- Dr. Laura Markham: That's what he needs to see, is your need for him. And you say, "Okay, I'm going to be brave. I'm going to do this. I'm going to say bye-bye. Bye- bye. Bye-bye. Remember, you have the magic word if you need me." And you walk firmly toward the closet. But you don't even get inside. You

might get your hand on the doorknob -- and you yell the magic word and run back to your child.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And your child is by now laughing at you, but wanting you to go in the closet to see what happens. So you're the one who has separation anxiety, not your child. So they're laughing at you. You try it again and maybe you get the closet door open, but you don't get in. You try it again and maybe you get your foot inside, but not your head or all of you, not your head.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Over and over you're doing this and running to your child and you say, "Can I be brave? Will you help me? What should I do to be brave?" But he's laughing and I will tell you, I have seen this work with kids who had severe separation trauma, including kids who had been adopted. So I think that's probably going to heal it (the separation anxiety) if that's just what's going on with your son, which we're hoping it is. And hopefully this will be a thing of the past soon. Good luck.

Question 41:

Parent:

02:24:39

I have twin girls. They're eight years old in second grade. And one of them within the past year I would say, has started to develop some signs of generalized anxiety. So we're just trying to learn about that and get up to speed on anxiety. And find resources and try to work on finding some good coping skills to help her. Her anxieties just shift day-to-day, so it's like this underlying unease.

Parent:

And we've already talked to a guidance counselor at her school and gotten her a few books. But I was wondering if you had any recommendations, either yourself or if you could point me to resources that could help a parent with an elementary-school age child, who is starting to manifest anxiety? Because we want to give her a lot of support now to try to get ahead of it.

Dr. Laura Markham: Great. Okay. So, you mentioned that your daughter's anxiety, what she's anxious about changes on different days. That's actually a hallmark of anxiety. What ends up happening is sometimes we focus on the thing you're anxious about that day, right? Which might be riding in an elevator or going to school or whatever, going to sleep.

Dr. Laura Markham: But actually, as you're pointing out, it can change. What she's anxious about can change day to day and that's because it's actually anxiety, it can get attached to anything. So I think you hit on something that's really important in understanding how to treat and how to help your daughter with anxiety, which is, don't focus on whatever the symptom of the moment is. Focus on the way anxiety works.

Dr. Laura Markham: Have a discussion with her about the fact that anxiety is her overactive amygdala, and that's a really important thing. The amygdala is a really important part of the brain and the neurological system. It tells us when there's an emergency, but hers is too active. And it's telling her there's an emergency when there isn't one, and it can find emergencies unfortunately, in anything.

Dr. Laura Markham: And so what you want to say to her is that when she feels anxious, she should stop, take a breath, notice the anxiety. Just notice the anxiety and instead of letting it take over and run things, consider whether it's actually true or not, that she needs to be anxious about going to school or going to bed at night, or whatever it is she's anxious about at that moment.

Dr. Laura Markham: I think it really helps kids. She's eight. Most of the time it really helps kids that age to think of the anxiety as somebody trying to push them around, and she's not going to let that anxiety push her around. And it often helps to give it a name, so that she can stand up to it like it's a bully. And so I would have that kind of a discussion with her. Is she actually seeing a therapist at the moment?

Parent: No, we haven't done that yet.

- Dr. Laura Markham: So if you do see a therapist, make sure it's somebody who really has dealt with childhood anxiety. You want to see results pretty immediately. You want somebody who's going to explain anxiety to her. Help her come up with a plan to deal with it when she has these anxious thoughts.
- Dr. Laura Markham: And I think the final thing I'd like to say about this, so that you can keep it in mind as you're parenting her, is that anxiety is fear. And fear has a way, when it gets a foothold, when it gets an inch, it takes a mile. And it has a way of, when it gets a foothold in your child's life, it expands. So if she's scared of elevators and so you always take the stairs because of her fear, then elevators stop being a problem, but it will expand and the next thing she'll be afraid of is something else like stairs or whatever. So it's important to do what you're afraid of.
- Dr. Laura Markham: So I would be having a conversation with her on a regular basis, that she can do hard things, and she can do things she's afraid of. This is true for every child. There's so many things kids are afraid of, that we're all afraid of. So I encourage families to have a courage project, where they talk about things that scare each person in the family and they talk about what they did this week to encounter that thing. And to take some brave action that made them a little less afraid of it by conquering their fear a little bit by facing it.
- Dr. Laura Markham: So I think anything she's afraid of, you can have the attitude of, I'm right here. You've got back up. Don't let her avoid those things. She can go as slowly as she wants into the water. You're not going to throw her in, but she does need to get in the water because if she just avoids it forever, she will avoid the water forever and then it'll expand into other things. Does that make sense?
- Parent: Yeah, that's very helpful.

Question 42:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:30:09

A parent is asking about her three-year-old who is securely attached, but at preschool she is anxious and withdrawn. So I think this is that she needs to be in a small preschool where she's not overwhelmed by the noise and crowds, and where she has a strong bond with the caregiver. So it's not exactly separation anxiety. Right? I mean it is but the cure for separation anxiety is a bond with the caregiver. So that's what she needs, she needs a strong relationship with the teacher there.

Dr. Laura Markham:

The other thing you said you were worried about, she's worried about holes. That something will come out of a hole and touch her. The problem with fears like that is that they expand and they swallow your whole life. So there's a post, an answer to a question on the Aha! Parenting website about a child who's afraid of bees. Like the bug bees that fly around in the summer. Read that article because it has a lot of ideas that will be helpful to you about working with fears.

Dr. Laura Markham:

We don't want her to have a fear of holes and then she avoids holes. And then after awhile it limits her and she can't go anywhere outside because there might be a hole. You really want to work on the fear of holes, don't just indulge it. So get her laughing about holes by pretending that you're scared of them. Let her build a hole from clay or you build a hole from clay and have your finger waggle out of it or something.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Get her an indoor tent that she loves, and go in and out of the door of the indoor tent and refer to the door as, "The hole that lets you in and out of the tent." So do anything you can to address the fear of holes.

Question 43:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:31:42

I have a question here about separation anxiety in a four year old. This is a mom who's a stay at home mom and

only leaves her daughter for church functions twice a year with her husband. I would say your husband is your daughter's father, I presume in this case. And so she can be with her dad on a regular basis. And I would start leaving her with her dad on a regular basis, so that she gets used to being without you, but forms a better, stronger relationship with him. So she's happy to be with him in your absence, so you can get a little time for self-care, number one.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And number two, so she gets a little bit more comfortable navigating the world with a different, close, big person, in this case her dad, so it doesn't always have to be you. This will enrich your daughter's life and it is worth it and that's her dad so it's completely fine.

Dr. Laura Markham:

It's age appropriate that she is a little worried at Disney World when you took her, that she had to hold your hand while she greeted the special characters. Of course. That's scary. It's age appropriate she had to hold your hand. But in general, since she's had such a hard time separating from you, I would practice separation (by leaving her) with her dad.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And even if she cries, as long as her dad knows to just say, "I know you miss mommy. I miss mommy too when she goes. You can cry as much as you want. I'm right here with a hug. And as soon as you're ready, we'll go and we'll look at the birds at the bird feeder in the back or whatever."

Dr. Laura Markham:

I would also play. You said you've tried playing hide and seek with her? She doesn't like it because she doesn't like the separation? Do a more modest version of it. Do the abracadabra game where she has a magic word to bring you back.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I have seen this work with kids who have severe separation anxiety. It's a way to help them work through it, which puts them in control. But remember, you're not actually going in the closet, or at least you're not going in the closet until you've been playing this game for a long time and she's laughing and laughing and laughing and

loving it. And I think if you do that and you start leaving her regularly with dad who comforts her in your absence, I think you'll find that she'll get past the separation anxiety.

Question 44:

- Dr. Laura Markham: 02:33:54 A parent says, "When my almost four-year-old goes to visit her dad, she gets really anxious before, and after and she has full blown meltdowns and regresses." So luckily she's talking happily about her time with her dad and she's happy to see him when she does see him. So that's great. So it's not about her father. So this is an issue about separating from you, and I think you need to help her with that issue.
- Dr. Laura Markham: So when she knows a visit is coming up, when you announce that to her, you announce it and she flips out, right? So it's triggering a lot of feelings about separating from you. When we announce that to our child, we need to give them an opportunity to work the feelings out, and the best way to do that is laughter and the second best way to do that is through tears.
- Dr. Laura Markham: So I would say begin playing with her. You want to activate the feelings about it first, by announcing she's going to go to her dad's, but then give her a chance to laugh them out. So a good game for this is the "don't leave me game". You hold her on your lap and you hug her and snuggle her and kiss her. And then when she gets ready to leave or maybe she's standing on the floor, but she's between your legs.
- Dr. Laura Markham: And as she gets ready to leave you trap her and say, "No. No. Please don't leave me. Never leave me. I only want you with me ever." And she'll laugh about it. And remember it's a role reversal. She feels angry at you because she feels like you're pushing her away when you send her to her father's. So instead, now you're claiming that you want her, and she's the one who's pushing you away, which is a very good feeling for her to have, so she feels a little empowered here.

Larry Cohen, who wrote the book, literally *Playful Parenting*, says he just picks up a stuffed animal and says, "Hello" and has the stuffed animal say "Hello" back and then "Goodbye" and it says "Goodbye." And it faces you and then it faces away and it faces you and it faces away. "Hello. Hello. Goodbye. Goodbye. Hello. Hello. Goodbye. Goodbye."

Dr. Laura Markham:

And you can be really silly about it. Children love this because they experienced 20 or 30 playful hellos and goodbyes in quick succession. And it activates all the feelings about separation and it gets them laughing about it, so it's a safe and fun way to work through the feelings. And he points out that, "It's possible the kid will start to cry," which is great if they do that. Bingo. That's a good thing. That's what you want her to do because again, that works out the same feelings.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Also, any laughter's good for her because it's empowering. Any child who's struggling with fear and that's what separation is, it's empowering for that child to do any kind of roughhousing to get them laughing. Silly dancing, pillow fights, wrestling, anything like that. Putting her on your back and letting her shriek with laughter when you're the bucking bronco.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And then I would also talk with her about it. After you laugh. "You're going to go to daddy's. What will help you feel still connected to me?" My daughter always took a scarf of mine to sleepovers even when she was much older than four, so that she had something of me to hang on to.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And then finally when she gets angry at you, you need to explain that you always want to be with her. You never want to let her go. And show the vulnerability, so that she gets that you're not pulling the strings here. This is just the situation. This is your house and that's daddy's house and daddy wants time with her too.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I think you showing your vulnerability in this, will also help her to show her vulnerability. So she's more likely to cry about it, especially if she's done a bunch of laughing first.

Question 45:

- Dr. Laura Markham: 02:37:32 A parent says, "I have identical twin boys that have separation anxiety that they're struggling with." You say, "They cry after football club." That suggests that maybe they're just overwhelmed by it. That makes them long for you, being overwhelmed. It makes them long for your protection, and so when you appear they've got a full backpack and they cry when you get there. And it's because they thought you wouldn't come back, but maybe it's not really that.
- Dr. Laura Markham: Maybe it's that, it's a long school day and on top of that football club is a lot to ask of them, especially since they have a developmental delay in their motor stuff. So I'm wondering if that's actually separation anxiety or if you're asking too much of them with the football club. So I would just ask that question of yourself.
- Dr. Laura Markham: You said, "They don't want to go to school alone when the other one is sick." That also sounds completely normal to me. I have to say many twins do that because their twin is like a security blanket, and suddenly they're being asked to do without their security blanket.
- Dr. Laura Markham: I know that most kids wouldn't have that reaction because they don't have a twin. But if your partner is away on business and you have a harder time sleeping, you don't sleep quite as well, that would be exactly the same thing -- and these are five-year-olds. So I'm not so sure that's a big deal but I always trust parents' intuition. And you're saying your boys are struggling with separation anxiety. So, I'm going to suggest you play separation games, like holding the kid on your lap when they want to get off, and the bye bye game. I would activate the feelings by playing, and that gives the child a chance to laugh them out, and also the role reversal is helpful, and roughhousing. Kids who feel pushed around, it's empowering for them to do roughhousing.

Question 46:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:39:15

The next question is from a parent who says, “Our three year old seems to be experiencing separation anxiety because I work three days a week. When she's with me, she always wants her daddy to go away and tries to send her baby sister away too. She gets upset if I don't dress like her or eat the same breakfast as her. Some of her meltdowns are aggressive. When I say ‘I love you’ during a tantrum, this really annoys her and she says (that) I don't love her. We're feeling worn down. I'm exhausted and my husband feels helpless.” Oh, that is so hard. And it sounds like your three-year-old probably feels even worse than you do. She must be having a very hard time on those three days when you're working, and of course that's combined with having to share you with the baby sister. You don't say how long you've been working, but it sounds like this is a relatively new thing. So the solution to this has three parts.

Dr. Laura Markham:

First, make sure that your three-year-old's emotional needs are met on the three days when you're gone. It sounds like the current situation is not fully doing that, or she wouldn't be responding so dramatically unless it's brand new, so that she's still getting used to you working. So she needs to feel emotionally bonded to the caregiver. That person will never be you, but your daughter should trust that they will meet her needs, and that will make it easier for her to handle the times when you're gone. We have to remember that we're asking a lot from our children when we work. That doesn't mean we can't work or shouldn't work. It just means that we need to make sure that they have a bond with the person who is caring for them that really helps them feel safe in the world.

Then of course we have to honor that they're grieving because they've lost something of great value to them, which is that time with us. So work to stay connected to her during the times you are with her. I realize that's hard; you have a baby too. So it's especially important to do

special time daily while the baby sleeps, and every morning or evening on your work days.

And then finally, I'm going to suggest that you improve your daughter's relationship with her daddy. I want to start by saying I know it feels awful to have your child reject you as she's doing right now with her dad. Every one of us would feel hurt by that. But we're talking about a three year old who feels she's being deprived of her mommy, and even that she has to share mommy with the baby sister. So naturally when she's told daddy's going to take care of her, she gets upset. She feels that daddy is getting in between her and mommy. He's pushing her away from mommy. So like all of us, when she's upset, she lashes out.

Dr. Laura Markham:

She is trying to drive your husband away. But it's not because she doesn't love him. It's because she thinks she can't have you. It's totally understandable from a three year old's perspective. So here's the thing, she's three, your husband's the grownup. It's his job to grow in this situation so that he can **not** take this personally and can stay loving and caring with her. Specifically to help him with this, I recommend the game, "You can't get to mommy," that you can find on the Aha! Parenting website on the games page.

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/connection/play-child-emotional-intelligence>

I think I got this game originally from Larry Cohen, but I've recommended it many times over the years to parents, and generally what we see is that the child works through her fears of being kept from the preferred parent, which helps the child to accept the other parent instead of needing to defend her time with the preferred parent.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So very often what we see when you play this game a few times is that the child starts requesting to spend more time with the formerly non-preferred parent. It really does help them work through something. Then once your daughter is more comfortable with her daddy, I have

another suggestion. Start leaving her with him once a week for a short time. Take your baby daughter, leave the house for an hour. Have special time with the baby. Have some time to yourself. But before you do this, your husband has to have clarity that his job is to be the comforter for your daughter during this hour that you're gone. No matter what, his job is not to distract her, not to get mad at her, because she is going to try to send him away. She's going to be angry.

Dr. Laura Markham:

His job is to say, "You're so sad mommy left. Me too, I miss mommy too when she's gone. But I am your daddy. I am right here. I will take care of you." And if she throws herself on the floor and has a fit, that's fine. If she tries to kick him, he can say, "I know, you're so mad. You're scared and worried cause mommy's not here. But you know what? I am your dad. I am here for you. You can always show me these big feelings, and I will always take care of you." If your husband can step up and do that, this will allow him to develop a deeper bond with his daughter where she feels like **he** can meet her needs too. You're not the only one who can meet those needs. She'll respect him more. She'll feel more connected. She won't be as aggressive or mean to him, and you know what? He's going to be so happy to have this bond with her when she's 12 and 14.

Question 47:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:44:10

There's a question about how to help a child feel more empowered to make decisions instead of feeling afraid of them. I think this is a great question. It's perfectionism, and you can really get playful about mistakes, and you can teach your child that there is no such thing as a bad choice. When you have to make a decision and you're anxious about it, either one is going to be a good choice, either one. So you'll make the choice and you'll learn from it, and you'll see what happens and that's just the way it works. There can't be a bad choice.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I think there's a great description of this in the book. *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, I think that's the book. Her name is Susan Jeffers, J-E-F-F-E-R-S, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, and she has a whole chapter in her book on what to do when you have to make a decision and you're anxious about making decisions or about how to make that decision. It's about overcoming fear, it's a fantastic book. And the specific question of how do you make a decision or how do you overcome your anxiety to make a decision, I think if you read that chapter, you would find that you would be able to be very helpful to your daughter in feeling more comfortable making her decision. So I encourage you to do that.

Question 48:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:45:25

A parent is asking about her sensitive four-year-old. If we correct her behaviors by telling her it's not okay to do something, she starts to cry and she's embarrassed, even if I'm calm when I tell her. What can I do to help her not be afraid of making mistakes?

Dr. Laura Markham:

Well, we're all afraid of making mistakes and it's an important thing to do to talk about mistakes on a regular basis at your house. Like, "Oh, I made a really interesting mistake today. I forgot to put money in the meter and I got a ticket. Can you believe it? Wow, I wonder what I can learn from this mistake. What can I do next time? How can I remind myself? Anybody else make any good mistakes today that you learned from?" So that's one way to talk about mistakes as something of value.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But I also think you might want to rethink how you're correcting her because she's already highly sensitive. So this is when you're telling her it's not okay to do something. So remember, you can set a limit with empathy in a way that your kid barely gets that it's a limit, or they may get that it's a limit, but they don't think of it as

a correction or a mistake. It doesn't mean they were wrong.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So the way you set a limit with empathy is you always start by acknowledging the child's wants and needs. What's behind what she's doing. So in other words, you connect first, and then you set the limit. And then she may cry, it's true in disappointment, but it never needs to be an embarrassment that she made a mistake. It's just disappointment, she's not allowed to do something that she wants to do. So I wouldn't imply that she's made a mistake at all, this shouldn't be about mistakes. I would really just notice as you go through your day anytime you feel a need to correct her, and consider what message she might get from what you say and try to think of examples.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You should never have to show her she made a mistake. It may be like, "Wow, Sweetie you're so full of energy today, you're really loving running, aren't you? And still..." this is a good one, this is like a "but", but it's better than "but", because "but" negates the fact that she has all that energy. "And still" -- and "even so", is another way to say it. "You're so full of energy today, you're really loving running, even so, we can't run in here. It's a crowded supermarket." So that sets a clear limit. You understood why she's doing it, but you're not judging her. You're not telling her it's a mistake. So I think that's going to be the key. If she feels you understand her and accept her and you aren't judging her, then she doesn't have to feel like there's anything to be embarrassed about. It wasn't a mistake at all. It has a different flavor to it, I guess is what I'm trying to say.

Question 49:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:47:58

Two parents have a five year old who hates being wrong or not knowing something.

So this is deep insecurity. Maybe from an older cousin or sibling or having been tested and feeling he failed. So

when I say tested, I mean like when they're toddlers we'll often say, "And what color is this? Blue, that's right. You know, you're so smart. Oh, and what color is this? That's red. That's right. And what color is this? No, no, that's not it. This is green, green say, can you say green?" So what just happened there? Your perfectly smart toddler just failed. And he didn't know that it wasn't reasonable that he would know all those colors yet, he just thinks he failed.

So when we test kids and we say, Oh, he's smart when he knows red, but then when he doesn't know green, we tell him he's wrong because it was wrong, then he thinks he failed. That's something to avoid doing when kids are little, because it's one of the things that creates perfectionism and defensiveness when they get older. I'm not saying that these parents did this with their son, but maybe grandma did it.

Dr. Laura Markham:

My mother in law, may her memory be a blessing, did this with my son. I had to explain to her what was going on and stop her from doing it. But she never understood why it was a bad idea. So grandma might've been doing it secretly without you knowing it, or maybe he's heard from people he's smart, and kids often respond to that by worrying that then they need to prove they're smart and they can't do things that they might not know or be wrong. And if you tell them something, they have to already know it to be smart.

So go back to the mastery stuff if you haven't read it yet, and see whether there's some stuff there that resonates for you that you might be able to do differently.

I would also say when your son says that he knew something or he was right, I would just respond with love and acceptance. It's like when a toddler says, I'm a better basketball player than LeBron James. Well a toddler wouldn't know, but maybe a four year old would say that. That's a fragile sense of wellbeing. And that's okay if he's depending on this artificial pumping himself up to feel good about himself.

That's what's happening with your five-year-old. You don't need to set the record straight. You don't need to correct him most of the time. When he says the sky is red, you can say, "Wow, really? That's a red sky. Huh, I didn't see red there. Thank you for telling me how you see it." He has a different perception, and you could say, "And you know what? I have often seen a red sky, especially early in the morning and late at night," but you don't have to make him wrong. When he says he already knows something, no reason you have to argue about it. If he begins to think he's good enough the way he is, he won't have to pump himself up artificially.

Question 50:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:50:51

A parent is asking about her four year old and saying, "I don't yell, but I used to be intimidating, like grab my son by the arms intensely with a mean, disrespectful tone telling him not to hit his sisters, or throw toys, and he still does that. He still hits, throws things at us when he's angry about his bike helmet not fitting, or losing a game, or us not pitching the ball to him perfectly so he can hit it."

So that's an interesting question because I think you have two things going on here. I think there's some anxiety here. That's why I'm seeing perfectionism here and that's anxiety. But I also think that your son is still recovering from your previous discipline method and it scared him, which you're acknowledging. I'm also hearing that for a four year old he doesn't have a lot of impulse control so he hits. But that's probably also coming from the anxiety.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So perfectionism is a very common problem with oldest kids, and I would talk about the perfectionism. I would talk about how no one is perfect. No one bats a thousand. I would give him mantras to use as antidotes to the perfectionistic voice in his head. And I would talk with him about that voice. You could say something to him like,

"You know, Sweetheart, sometimes I have a voice in my head that tells me I have to be perfect, and it makes me feel terrible if I don't do something right, like if I can't hit the ball or I can't pitch it to you perfectly, or when I was little, if I was playing a game and we lost our game, but you know what? That voice is not right. The most important thing is having fun and enjoying yourself. You know what I call my voice? Worried Wanda. And I have to tell her to relax, that nobody bats a thousand. Do you ever have a voice like that in your head, Hon?"

And start to talk about the perfectionism and you know, he's very young, so he's only four. So he will be able to find ways to stop being a perfectionist once he understands that's what he's doing to himself.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But remember, the best cure for anxiety is laughter. Always. It siphons off the top layer of fear in the emotional backpack, or you could say it shifts the body's neurotransmitters and hormones so that the biochemistry is actually different and you don't feel as stressed and anxious. So really all those things that we're always talking about as preventive maintenance, they're going to help him laugh and cry, which includes 24/7 empathy and laughter and special time. Those things are going to help him settle down and self-regulate in those moments where he's getting anxious about something because he can't hit the ball or whatever.

Question 51:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:53:26

We have a parent who says that her child has already started to crumble when he doesn't know how to do something and he's expressed that he feels stupid and wonders if he's actually smart. She connects this to the fact that he's constantly getting told by strangers that he's so smart because I guess he has an impressive vocabulary for a five-year-old, and that is heartbreaking. It just makes me want to weep when I hear that, because here's this beautiful child who's curious and loves words and uses

words and the way people respond to this child is making the child doubt himself. It's a textbook case. So I would just say every time this happens that somebody gives some feedback, you want to talk about it every time.

Dr. Laura Markham:

"Huh? That person said you were smart. What do you think about that? Why do you think she said that? What does smart mean? Does smart mean you know big words? Huh, do you think you know big words? Why do you think she was impressed by that?" Really ask questions about the other person, their motivation, their understanding. Then make it clear that the other person doesn't necessarily know anything, isn't really the arbiter of anything that matters and make it clear that what you value is that your child is curious and loves the words and wanted to talk to this person, rather than that your child uses big words. That's not the point. The point is to enjoy the words.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I would also really be careful about the way you give any feedback. And again, this is all covered in the mastery chapter of *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*, if you haven't read it. But basically when your child expresses worry about whether they're really smart, just say, "Do you know what smart is? No one has ever actually been able to agree about what smart means. Some people think it means that you know lots of things, but other people think it means you can figure out a lot of things. Teachers think it means you do well in their class, but you know what it takes to do well in a teacher's class? You have to work hard. So it's really about working hard in that case. Are you a hard worker? Hmm? Do you know a lot of things? Can you find out things you don't know? Yeah, so I don't think that being smart is really what matters. I think what matters is that you work hard to figure things out and to find things out, and I love that about you."

Dr. Laura Markham:

You need to have other things that your child is valued for and values himself for, besides this whole idea of being smart. You're never telling him he's not smart, of course he's smart, but that's not what matters, getting that feedback from strangers, they don't know anything.

Question 52:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:56:30 Our next question is from a parent who says, “My four year old son is terribly competitive and also easily frustrated. I'm concerned he'll quit things as he gets older if he isn't quickly rewarded or doesn't get to do it right the first time.”

Dr. Laura Markham: So I hear from your question, that you're not pressuring your son to perform, but I'm wondering if he has that coming from his other parent? Our children are not immune to perfectionism. They breathe it in if we breathe it out. And that's especially true for the first child in the family usually. Even really well-meaning parents inadvertently create anxiety in their children by saying things like, “You're so smart” or other comments that evaluate who the child is, and the child then feels like they have to live up to those comments by being perfect and by getting everything right the first time or it shows they're not that smart.

Dr. Laura Markham: We also make this worse when we test our children. So if you have a two year old or a three year old and they're learning their colors and you test them and say, what color is that? You're setting your child up for anxiety later and perfectionism because they know it's a test. They know they could fail that test and they know that you might not think as well of them if they don't please you, and pleasing you is a really important thing for your child. I'm not saying this is true for you. Your question leads me to think it's probably not true for you, but I'm saying this for anybody who's listening, who's having this concern with their child.

If you're not familiar with these ideas that I'm talking about, I encourage you to read up on praise on the Aha! Parenting website, and another good source is Gwen Dewar at ParentingScience.com. Gwen Dewar is an evolutionary biologist. She really does her research and she's written some good articles on praise and the scientific studies about them with some guidelines on how

to encourage kids without turning them into perfectionists or kids who shy away from something new, and those are really just two sides of the same coin.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I want to add, that your son may also just be competitive by nature. I think some people just are, and those kids usually don't quit when things come easy because their driving force is they want to win.

So the real issue here is that your son gets easily frustrated and gives up easily. That's developmental, that'll get better as he gets older. So I doubt it's a big issue, but in the meantime, I would really notice every time he gets frustrated and acknowledge how hard whatever it is he's doing is. Acknowledge every time he works a little longer at something, even though he's frustrated by it, so he feels that acknowledgement from you. This is the skill you want them to develop, so it's what you need to attend to.

So even when it seems to you that he gives up too fast, think of it from his perspective and empathize and acknowledge the thing that he did do, which is try it, even if he tried it for a short time. So you say, "Wow, that was so hard doing that, but you kept trying for a whole minute, even though it was hard. Soon you'll be able to try for two minutes. Good for you."

Dr. Laura Markham:

Also, I want to let you know, there's a whole chapter in *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids* that will help you. We haven't gotten there yet, it's the mastery chapter at the end of the book, but we will be covering it at the end of this course.

Question 53:

Dr. Laura Markham: 02:59:39

Our next question is from a parent who says, "My four year old avoids trying new things including life skills like brushing his teeth and things that should be fun. I think he's in a negative cycle where anxiety prevents him from getting the practice he needs to build confidence. I do try to praise effort, not outcome, and I work hard at

connecting and making sure he knows that he's loved just as he is."

So you're doing all the right things. One thing that would help to take the pressure off your son is to notice the way that you praise him as we just discussed in the answer to the last question. That will diminish his anxiety about performance. But it does sound like you're praising effort instead of outcome and keeping things lighthearted and that's what matters. So making things fun also matters a lot.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And finally, I would make sure he has incentives to try new things because otherwise why should he face that anxiety? He'll feel good about himself once he tries the new thing, but in that moment where he isn't sure it's worth it, go ahead and sweeten the deal with something else for him to move toward. I wouldn't use explicit bribes or he might refuse to try anything new without a treat or a bribe, but do find small ways to make it worth his while like an extra book at bedtime when he tries to brush his own teeth or extra time at the playground when he gets up his nerve to climb on the new climbing structure. Celebrate every time he takes a risk and tries something new and celebrate it with things that he enjoys doing too.

Dr. Laura Markham:

The other thing you can do is diminish his overall anxiety level -- and of course I think you know that by now in this course -- that you do that with laughter. Be sure he gets half an hour of laughter, belly laughter, every single day. This is what I would prescribe for anyone whose child is having a hard time with anxiety or with big emotions or with connection. It is such a valuable tool, laughter, because it increases the bonding hormones and it decreases the stress hormones. So if you've ever tried to keep laughing for half an hour with your child, you'll know it is very hard to do. That's a long time. You'll probably want to start with a much smaller dosage and then keep increasing as you become more able to tolerate it and as you come up with more and more ways. And as your bond with your child gets stronger, you'll find that they'll laugh more readily and it's easier to sustain the laughter for

longer. But if you have an anxious child, you will see a real difference.

Parent: 03:02:05 Mainly my question was about my son, I think he was just born kind of vibrating on a high level and he's so perfectionistic about everything. So he'll be playing independently and he will be building blocks or doing something like that, and you'll just hear him scream out of frustration because he has this picture of what he wants to do and how he wants it to go, and it doesn't go according to plan. So I guess my question is how to support him with that. What do I say to support him through his frustration and help him deal with it productively?

Dr. Laura Markham: Right, right. So, some children really do seem to be born more perfectionistic than others.

Parent: Yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham: And I think it's about having this version of what they want, a clear picture of what they want, and they're so far from it. We we can all relate to this. If you and I sat down to draw the landscapes we're looking at right now, I don't know about you, but I would be so frustrated with my drawing that I would feel really inadequate.

Parent: Absolutely.

Dr. Laura Markham: So I think if you had a clear picture of what you want and what you admire, you're going to find that, especially if you're a kid, that can be really hard. And I think as they get older -- I understand now that people might spend their entire lives working very hard and still be frustrated with their ability to draw the landscape.

Parent: Yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham: So it's okay that I can't do it. But he doesn't have that perspective. I think so, I think that's part of the problem

that kids have, is that they don't have that perspective of how hard it is to learn how to do these things he's trying to do. So one thing is always to empathize with him. "That's so frustrating when you can't get it to do what you want. Oh my goodness, that's so frustrating." So there's that.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I do think that there's a way that we, unwittingly, I wouldn't say we cause this, but I would say that when kids have anxiety about making mistakes, we can make that worse without even knowing we're doing it. So the way to think of that is, how do we give encouragement and feedback to kids? So, instead of saying, "Wow, you did that perfectly" which basically evaluates what he's done.

Parent:

Yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham:

To simply empathize with what he's saying. Like if he says, "Hey, I did exactly what I wanted to do," you can say, "Yes, oh you did it, you got it to do just what you wanted, wow. Give me five. That is so cool, show me. Hey, how did you do this? Wow. This is the coolest thing ever. But you must've run into some problems. How did you get past those?"

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you're empathizing and you're helping him reflect on how he was able to create success for himself, as opposed to evaluating. When we evaluate kids, what happens is they feel like they're not good enough. Even if they did a perfect job this time, it makes them think "Will she say I did a perfect job next time or not?"

Parent:

Yeah, absolutely.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Right. So I think we can make kids become insecure about the kinds of feedback we give them. So evaluating and anything that emphasizes the outcome of it, even. So, in this case, we've been talking about the outcome where he says, "I got it to do what I wanted to do." Even that is the outcome, but we've just given him feedback in the form of our questions that takes him into the process a little bit more. "Wow, you must have run into problems. How did you get past those to get this to work out this way?"

Parent:

Yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Otherwise what ends up happening is we emphasize the outcome. So we say, "Your tower is really great. You were able to really do this," and we're always looking at the end result. So the child feels like unless they come up with a perfect end result, it's a problem. It's a waste of their time, it's not good enough. Whereas the truth is, any artist will tell you, any engineer will tell you, any scientist will tell you that half of getting to a final product is they feel good about the trial and error and all the mistakes along the way, and all the things that didn't work out. That they learned from.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I think we can, with our feedback, communicate that to kids. We can say, "Well, how did you overcome the problems?" Or we can say, "I see you really working hard at that." Or, we could describe a specific strategy that we see them using. "You're doing the outside of the puzzle first," or anything that speaks to the process of what they're doing as opposed to the final result of what they're doing, I think this can really help reduce that anxiety. Also, I'm not saying you're doing this, because I know this is what all of us do and you may or may not do these things yourself.

Parent:

Ironically I am pretty go with the flow. I make fun of myself and I just, you know, I definitely have a perfectionistic part of my personality, I think many of us do. But for the most part I was a teacher and I know you have to go with the flow with kids. I'm like that with him, and I'm fun loving and I poke fun at my mistakes. So sometimes I kind of get this exasperation of, where is this coming from? Like where is this extreme frustration coming from? Because when I make mistakes, I model that for him, "Oh well we can figure out how to turn this around." Or "Whoops, mommy dropped a dish, let's clean it up. No big deal." So it is funny to see that in him when I feel like I've put all this effort into saying things like, "We can always fix our mistakes, no big deal."

- Dr. Laura Markham: That's such a great example of how we can still be pretty relaxed and they're born a certain way. Right?
- Parent: Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: So no question that, it's just who he is and you didn't create him being phobic about mistakes or getting anxious. I do think it is part of the personality, and I also think that as he develops more impulse control, he will be better off. I'm thinking of one young man I know who when he was learning to play the piano, this was one of my best friend's kids. And to play a piece on the piano, he would end up screaming and yelling and stomping around the house and tearing up or crumpling up the piano score. And she would just say, "Oh, Ian, I'm so sorry. That is a hard piece. Take a break, Sweetheart." And he would slam the door and go outside, and then he'd come back in and he'd sit down at the piano with this determination and he'd smooth out the paper -- and he became a very good piano player. And I think that's just who he was, so I do think some of them, that's who they are. And as long as they're willing to be determined to keep going back and trying again, that's really what matters. Does your son do that?
- Parent: Absolutely. Yeah. He has determination times five. He was born that way. The other day he wouldn't let me help him zip his coat up. And I said, "Okay, I'll just watch then." And he sat there for probably five minutes and tried to figure this zipper out, and he did it. He was screaming in frustration the whole time, but when he did it, he said, "I did it, mom. I did it by myself."
- Dr. Laura Markham: Well that's wonderful, because he's also learning he can do it himself and he can figure it out. And that's part of what's going to build the impulse control for him. He's going to not need to scream so much because he's going to know, he's alright. And you can use that with him. You can say to him, "Oh Honey, I see how frustrating it is. But you know, you have a knack for figuring things out. You always end up figuring it out. And I'm here to help if you need me, just let me know."

Parent: Yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham: But don't step in to do it for him because that is a way that we, and I bet you know this since you are a teacher, one of the ways we do create anxiety about mistakes is that when kids are first learning to do anything, we often say, "Oh, I'll get that for you." Or "No, no, no, you're going to spill it. Let me do that."

Parent: Yep.

Dr. Laura Markham: And basically what is the message the child gets over and over again? You don't do it well enough. You make mistakes. I'm better at it. And of course that's really undermining, and it can make them very anxious about making mistakes. But I'm not hearing that your son is feeling this way. I'm hearing that he's learning, actually, that he can do things himself. So I think it's developmental and he'll be fine, and simply to empathize with how frustrating it is. And as long as he's not hurting people or property, I understand he'll get frustrated and scream and yell and maybe throw his Lego piece or something, but as long as he's not hurting people or property, I think you'll probably fine.

Parent: When he's at home, he sometimes gets to the point where he's so frustrated, but usually when we're at preschool or something, when he's around other people he can pull it together, for the most part. He doesn't have those same huge outbursts if it's not in his comfort zone.

Dr. Laura Markham: Well that's actually a good sign. Diagnostically, I would say if a child's having a hard time at school, it's a much harder problem for us to solve. If the child is basically able to hold it together at school and then they come home and fall apart, then we know the child feels safe at home. He's connected at home, he has help at home and he's able to pull it together in the world when he needs to. And that's diagnostically, that's a very good set up to have. The child's going to be fine.

Parent: Oh, thank you so much.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And that's all our questions for today. Thank you for listening, and I hope this was helpful. If you still have a burning question that wasn't answered on this audio, please submit it for possible inclusion on my podcast. Just go to AhaParenting.com/podcast and leave your question as a voice memo. This is Dr Laura Markham, wishing you less drama and more love. Goodbye for now.