

What Our College Panel Has to Say:

One University of Louisville student relayed that “Growing up everything in my life was scheduled. At home and school my life was structured, which provided a sense of security.” She described constantly checking the clock to make sure she was ready for the next transition and feeling anxious when things changed. Since college, “I realize that while the structure made me feel safe, it also made me uncomfortable with unexpected changes and a bit rigid in my routine. I’m working to be okay with things when they don’t go exactly as planned.”

What Our Literature Says:

In their book *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents*, anxiety experts Reid Wilson and Lynn Lyons discuss concerns regarding the increase in anxiety in today’s youth. They identify two main triggers for anxiety in youth as well as in their parents: uncertainty and discomfort.



PARENTING
PARADOX

Is My Kid Addicted to Certainty?

Today’s kids expect certainty. Predictability. Knowing. Knowing exactly how things will turn out. And if they don’t know and can’t plan for each step, some freak out, struggling to tolerate the distress that comes with not knowing.

Uncertainty and Discomfort

The anxious brain despises uncertainty and discomfort. In fact, it dislikes these so much that when a situation arises where the child doesn’t know EXACTLY how things will turn out or the child anticipates the slightest bit of discomfort, the brain tells the child “AVOID, avoid at all costs. You canNOT handle it.” Add to the mix a generation of helicopter parents, tiger moms, bulldozer parents, whatever you wish to call today’s parents and Bam, you’ve got kids who lack the skills to cope with changes and bumps in the road.

How Did Kids Get So Rigid?

Have parents, teachers, and professionals unknowingly created the expectation of certainty in today's children? Perhaps this is a product of misguided advice from the mental health and education fields to create predictability to help kids feel secure in their environment. From infancy, parents are told to put their children on a strict schedule. Preschools have set routines to make the class run smoothly. Even at swim practice, the daily set is written on the dry erase board so the swimmers can anticipate what will be expected next. The well-intentioned use of predictability has led to the unintentional consequence of today's kids lacking flexibility and coping skills in an uncertain world.

So Now What?

- Give your child the “gift of maybe.” It’s okay to have conversations about not knowing the outcome of a situation with a focus on your child’s ability to handle uncertainty.
- Increase how often you say to your child, “**Maybe it will work out and maybe it won’t**” instead of providing reassurance when certainty cannot be guaranteed.
- **Help your child remember a time when they weren’t certain** of the outcome and remind them that they were able to survive the past uncertainty, and maybe even had a fabulous time.
- **Be mindful of what you model.** When your child has slipped up, do you ask them for promises that “this will never happen again,” requesting certainty? Instead, discuss potential setbacks and how your child can decrease the possibility these could occur.
- Allison Carmen, the author of *The Gift of Maybe* suggests **having your child write down their biggest fear** and ask themselves, “Am I absolutely certain this is true.” Then have your child write “maybe” statements such as, “Maybe I will make the cheer team and maybe I won’t.”
- **Find opportunities where you do NOT provide concrete reassurance** such as, “I don’t know if you’ll get shots at the pediatrician today. But I do know if you do, you will make it through it. You might not like it, but you will make it through.”
- **Catch your child when they’re stuck in the “what if” zone** and try help them be in the moment.

It’s these little parenting shifts we make that can lead to significant change in our children’s ability to expect and tolerate distress. So, tomorrow when your child asks, “Am I going to make the select soccer team? Please, please, reassure me I will,” pause, think about the gift of uncertainty and say, “I don’t know. Maybe you will and maybe you won’t, but I do know that whatever the outcome, you have the skill to get through it.”