

Helping Your Child Find Anchors and Frameworks

By Barbara Probst

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“OH NO-O-O-O!!” Spencer shrieked. His howl seemed to fill the supermarket where Melissa stood in line, mortified at what others might be thinking as her six year-old screamed at the top of his lungs, “Just look at this – 500 milligrams of sodium!!”

Spencer was pointing to the fine print on the jar of spaghetti sauce. “It’s okay,” Melissa hissed, desperate for him to calm down until they could escape to the privacy of the car.

“IT’S NOT OKAY!” Spencer screamed back. “It’s FIVE HUNDRED milligrams!” The more Melissa tried to reassure him that there was nothing to worry about, the more hysterical he became. She felt helpless, embarrassed, angry. If he was going to have a meltdown in the grocery store, why couldn’t it be about candy like other kids?

When Melissa came to see me and described Spencer’s “over-reaction,” I realized that the real problem was that he didn’t have a framework for the information “500 milligrams.” Since he was intensely interested in numbers, 500 of something sounded like a lot. But 500 milligrams, relative to what?

Spencer was a scientist. He wasn’t going to take anything on faith just because an adult told him so – especially the assurance that everything was fine or there was nothing to worry about or “It’s not a big deal,” since his reality was that it *wasn’t* fine at all and *Melissa* was the one insisting on an incorrect interpretation of a dire situation. The way out of his anxiety, I realized, was through logic, not through emotional reassurance.

I explained to Melissa that Spencer needed a scientific framework for understanding sodium intake. “Let him go on the Internet and find out the daily recommended amount,” I said. “That will give him a *fact* – a starting point.” Spencer was emotionally overwrought, but the emotion originated in his mind, not in a social encounter or frustration over something he was trying to accomplish. The *way out* had to come from his mind, too – from knowledge and order.

Spencer learned that the recommended amount of sodium was 400-600 milligrams. I coached Melissa on how to help him monitor his sodium intake, reminding him that he wouldn’t be consuming the entire jar of tomato sauce but only a small portion. He had to use his math skills to estimate and divide the lasagna into portions – an activity he found calming and empowering – and then keep track during the day by

adding up what he ate. Melissa worried that recording all the sodium would make him even *more* obsessive and anxious, but it only took two days for him to discover that, in fact, he wasn't really in danger of an overdose. He was able to relax – not because she'd soothed him, but because she'd provided a way for him to come to the conclusion himself.

There are many children like Spencer whose minds are overflowing with ideas, possibilities, and implications. *What if* lightning strikes while we're walking to the car? *What if* I leave my action figure on the bus tomorrow? They can imagine these myriad possibilities with equal vividness, but don't know how to order all the potentiality they feel so keenly. Their anxiety often comes, not so much from the specific image of the lost toy or the bolt of electricity, as from the internal experience of disorder.

You can help your child find the order he craves by specifying, sequencing, and predicting. When Spencer couldn't find his Luke Skywalker action figure, then became hysterical and pushed Melissa away in fury when she tried to calm him, she learned to walk him through a five-step process:

1. Validate his feeling. In a low-key voice, tell your child, "Hmm. I can see that you're really upset." Don't begin by telling him not to feel what he's feeling.
2. Have him finish the sentence "I'm worried that ... " instead of assuming you know what's troubling him. (In this instance, Spencer said, "I'm worried I'll never find it and it'll be gone forever.")
3. Reach for past experience. "Based on your past experience, when something goes missing, what usually happens?" Make sure you frame the question as *usually*, not *always*, or you'll end up splitting hairs and arguing about rare or extreme instances. In most families, the answer will be that the lost object turns up.
4. Use probability theory. "So it's more likely than not that ... "
5. Have a contingency plan based on a model from a larger context. "Well, the official state policy for filing a Missing Persons Report is that you need to wait 48 hours. According to that policy, if Luke doesn't turn up by Thursday morning, we'll ... " This legitimizes your suggestion while buying time for the toy to reappear or for your child's reaction to subside. You're asking your child to wait, but you're providing a time frame for the wait that's anchored to a credible, more impersonal context.

These five steps – once you're accustomed to using them – don't actually take much time, although sometimes an abbreviated version is all that's needed. "Well, if lightning's going to strike, it'll be drawn to whatever is taller than the surrounding objects. Look up. Do you see anything taller than us?" Here again, a scientific framework and a logical sequence are the tools for helping a child anchor his anxiety.

Anchoring is much more effective than the other things we usually try when faced with a child who's upset, enraged, frightened, or locked-in. Distraction, minimization, teaching a child to "overcome" or "control" his reaction – these are all attempts to *get rid of* the feeling. They teach a child that the only acceptable path to self-regulation is through denial of his feelings. *Framing* and *anchoring*, on the other hand, help a child find a new internal order. They allow him to integrate the emotion and move on.