

Worried Sick About Your Child's Future? How to Stop the Anxiety

By **Debbie Pincus MS LMHC**



We've all been there: Your child misbehaves at a family gathering, and you leapfrog ahead to the future, where you see him making exactly the same kinds of mistakes in his adult life—times 10. Or your preteen daughter seems unmotivated at school and fails Algebra, and you start wondering if she'll be able to graduate high school, or even hold a job some day.

It's important to understand that anxiety leads our brains to play tricks on us. It fools us out of the now and into worrying about tomorrow.

This is called “Futurizing,” and it’s one of the most negative and potentially destructive things we can do as parents. Understand that futurizing—taking a present action or behavior and imagining a much worse outcome in the future—is not the same as recognizing a problem and putting a plan into place to help your child. (I’ll talk more about that in a minute.)

Why Do We Futurize?

We have enough to concern ourselves with in the present—why add more burden by worrying about the future? Still, most of us slide into this form of parental worrying from time to time. We think, “My son is so disrespectful. How will he keep a job or be a good husband some day?” Or, “My kid lies all the time. How will anyone ever trust her?” Or we worry that our introverted child will never have friends since he likes to spend so much time alone. It’s easy to make ourselves anxious by jumping to the future in our minds—and unfortunately once we get there, we remain in an anxious state or even become permanently panicky about our child’s prospects.

It’s important to understand that anxiety leads our brains to play tricks on us. It fools us *out of the now* and into worrying about tomorrow. It makes our focus rigid and keeps the present, real issues out of sight. Anxiety gets in our

way of solving problems—and in the way of our ability to help our child. We can't see ourselves or them very clearly when we're feeling this way. Of course, we can't help our child very effectively when our own perspective is distorted. Anxiety also makes us more judgmental and critical, and promotes catastrophic and "extreme" thinking. Although it is the anxiety talking in these situations, the danger here is that we start to *believe* what it is saying—and we respond to it as if it is our logical thought.

How We Create What We Most Worry about Happening

Futurizing can create what we most worry about happening. I once worked with a mother who worried that her child would grow up with low self-esteem because the mom felt that she herself lacked it. So she praised and put lots of positive focus on her child with the hope that her child would feel good about herself and grow up with more self-esteem than this mother did. Now, despite the mom's best intentions, her child grew up dependent on constant praise and attention from others, which left her feeling insecure by her teen years. She was nearly unable to feel good about herself when she didn't get constant praise and attention from others, and she became reliant on it. She was programmed to expect it. Sadly, this was just what her mom was trying to prevent.

If this mom would have been able to remain in the now, she would have been less anxious and therefore more able to see her child with more objectivity. She would more clearly have seen what her daughter actually needed (or didn't need) in order to develop self-esteem. Putting a plan into place that will help your child in the present will do her—and you—the most good.

Worrying is detrimental to you because it causes stress and robs you of energy. Stop and imagine what you would do with all the time you'd have if you stopped worrying about your child's future. Now just concentrate on what's happening with her right now. You might not feel great about the behavior she's displaying, but I'll bet it's a lot more manageable than trying to troubleshoot her entire life from where you stand now. Remember, you don't need to feel bad for something in advance; just focus on what's going on in the moment, and take it one step at a time.

Here are five things you can do today to stop worrying and start concentrating on who your child is right now.

1. **Remember that kids change.** Remind yourself that kids grow and change and develop and mature. Trust this natural process. What you

see now is not necessarily what you'll see in the future. Kids need guidance and direction, but proper guidance comes from clearly seeing what they need *today* so that they can do better tomorrow. James Lehman says to act "as if" with your child. What this means is that you act "as if" your child is behaving responsibly. Start expecting that of your child, and you might see a change in their behavior. Stop your own imagined fears and projections from running over you so that you can see your kids and parent them from clear lenses.

2. **Be careful not to assign meaning to the behavior you are seeing.** The interpretation might be more about you than the child. Ask yourself, "What do I see and hear, what is in front of me, what are the facts?" versus imagining, worrying and projecting. Remind yourself that kids are works in progress. Rather than being anxious about why they are doing what they're doing and putting meaning to it, instead remind yourself they just haven't yet learned the repertoire of skills that will help them to do better. Knowing you can provide those skills for them can help you calm down and do something productive. You can guide them to make better choices with consequences, boundaries and limits, rather than spending your time worrying about the poor choices they make and what that means for their future.
3. **Know the difference between what *is* versus what you think or imagine.** Learn your own history well enough so that you know yourself. This will help you to know when you might be projecting something about yourself onto your child versus when something is actually about the child. For example, if you know that you come from a family that was always anxious about sickness and health issues, you will be better able to know if you are holding your child back from participating in certain activities because of her own vulnerabilities or because of your unresolved issues in your own family.
4. **Worry is futurizing.** Understand that worrying is futurizing. If you find yourself going down the rabbit hole, stop and ask yourself these questions:
 - What is the likelihood of that happening? Is this realistic?
 - What do I actually see and hear, not what am I afraid of seeing and hearing or what I'm imagining all this means.

- Why am I worried about this particular thing? Is it more about my own unresolved issues or more about my child? If there's something there, then how can I cope?
- Am I jumping to conclusions, over-generalizing, mind reading, projecting? What are the actual facts that I need to pay attention to?

By pausing and doing an inventory of what's going on inside you, you'll have a good chance to stop worrying and start focusing on how to problem solve the task at hand.

5. **Practice meditation and mindfulness.** Include in your life the things that will lower your anxiety and help you to live in the present. You might take a walk, pray, do yoga, or just sit in the sun for a moment clearing your head. This will not only help your personal growth, it will help you to know where you end and where your child begins. Defining yourself and being securely planted in the present will allow you to raise kids who will thrive in the future.

Staying in the present, not worrying about the future, and knowing what belongs to us—and not them—helps us see what our children actually need now and then we can provide it. After all, that's all we have control over. Staying firmly planted in the present helps you see if you are reacting to something your child actually said or did, something you *imagine* your child said or did, or something you *fear* that your child might say or do in the future.

You will better know where your child is coming from when you're paying attention to what's going on in the present.

About Debbie Pincus MS LMHC



For more than 25 years, Debbie has offered compassionate and effective therapy and coaching, helping individuals, couples and parents to heal themselves and their relationships. Debbie is the creator of the *Calm Parent AM & PM* program and is also the author of numerous books for young people on interpersonal relations.