Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions (SPACE): **School-Based Applications**

Rebecca Etkin, PhD

Associate Research Scientist

Anxiety & Mood Disorders Program

Yale Child Study Center, Yale School of Medicine

YALE CHILD STUDY CENTER
Where discovery inspires care

Disclosures:

- Research funding from *Mental Research Institute* and *MQ: Transforming Mental Health*
- Compensation from SPACE training and consultation

Learning Objectives:

- Describe 3 facts about youth anxiety disorders
- Define accommodation of youth anxiety and its impact
- Create a 'supportive statement' in response to youth anxiety

YALE CHILD STUDY CENTER
Where discovery inspires care

Everyone has some anxiety! When does it become a *disorder*?

- Frequent, persistent
- Level of fear out of proportion to the situation
- Significant personal distress
- Significant interference with daily life, relationships, things children need and want to do…

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent class of youth mental health diagnosis

Liu et al., 2024; Merikangas et al., 2010; Racine et al., 2021

Current evidence-based treatment approaches work well for ~50% of youth…

…If youth will engage in them

SPACE (Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions)

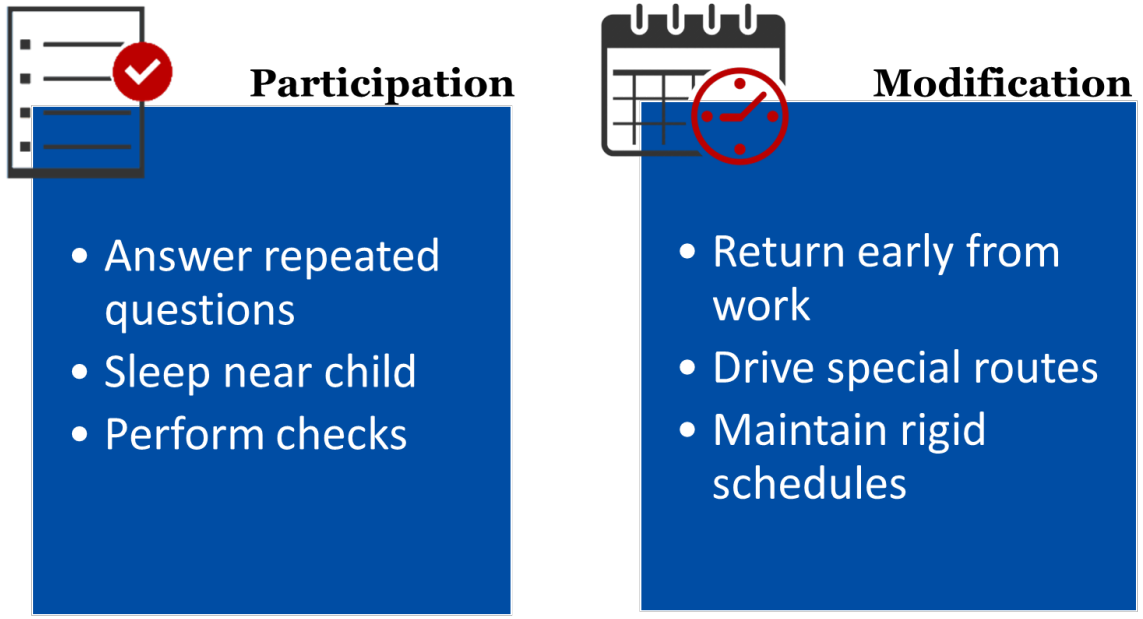
- The first *fully* parent-based treatment for childhood and adolescent anxiety disorders and OCD

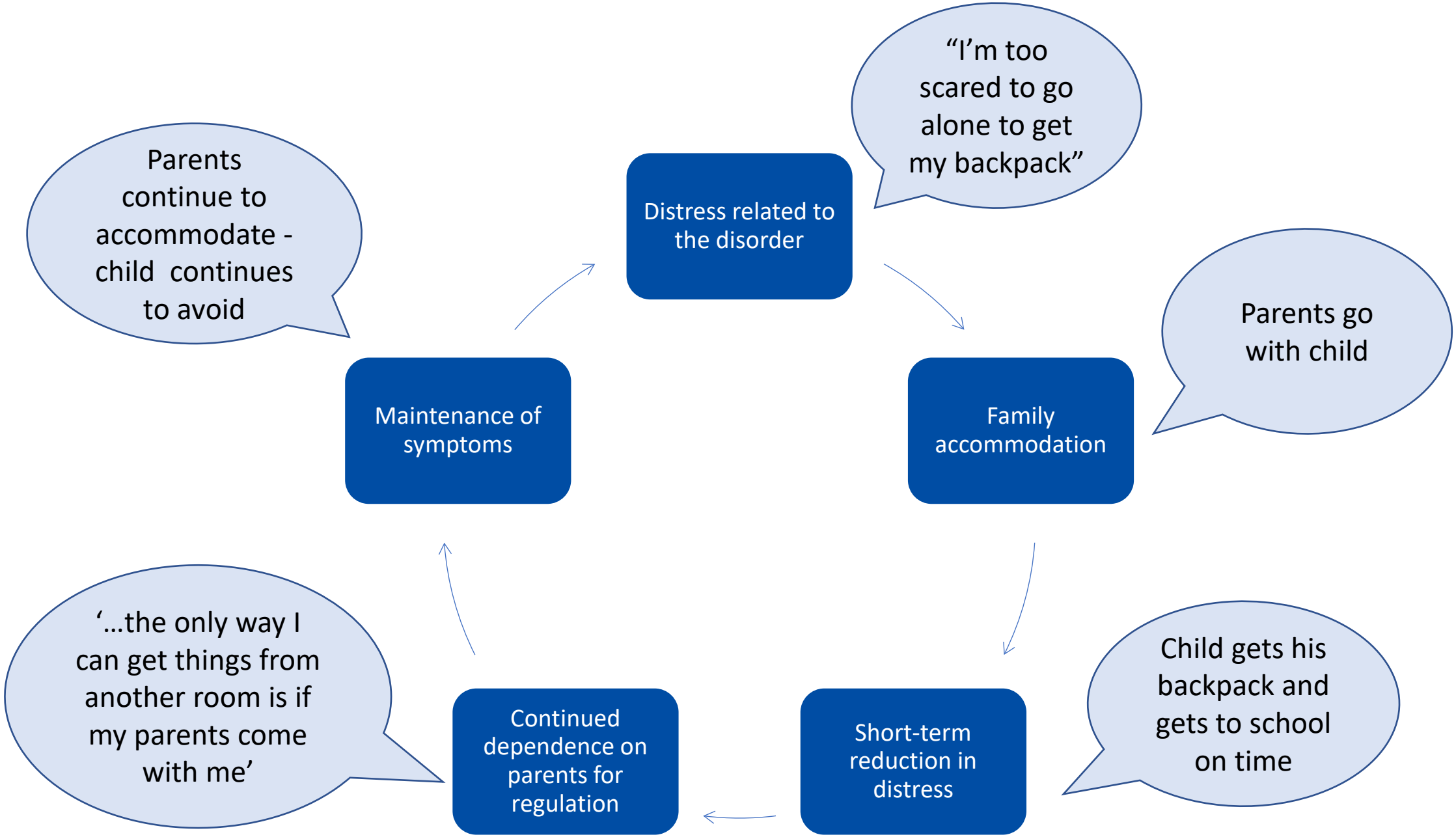
- Several open trials and randomized controlled trials provide support for its acceptability, feasibility, and efficacy
  - Lebowitz et al. 2020: Largest RCT to date, showed equivalent outcomes between SPACE and CBT

How can you treat youth anxiety by working exclusively with parents?

Family Accommodation of Anxiety

- Changes that family members make to **their own behavior** to help prevent or alleviate their child's anxiety and related distress





Shimshoni et al., 2019

SPACE Treatment Goals

Increase Support

Decrease
Accommodation

How does this apply to school-based anxiety?

- Utility of increasing supportive messaging
- Rethinking school-based accommodations

Vignette: Bea & Naseer

Bea was an experienced middle school teacher. She had taught so many students she felt like she'd seen it all, but Bea was still impressed by Naseer. He clearly spent a lot of time on all his assignments and was meticulous about getting everything done on-time and perfectly. So, she was not surprised when Naseer approached after class now and then to ask a question about an assignment. But over the school year it seemed like Naseer was asking these questions more and more, and she had to spend more and more time answering. By the end of the first term Naseer was coming to her after every single class, and his questions were getting odder. At first, he only would ask about something that was really unclear. But now it was becoming obvious that Naseer was confirming even things that were already clear, and he knew perfectly well. Then he started asking her the same question multiple times, confirming and reconfirming the instructions. Naseer's questions began to be problematic for Bea who needed the time between classes to prep or take a quick break. But when she tried to suggest to Naseer that he limit his questions, he teared up and looked so embarrassed and worried that she quickly took it back saying, 'don't worry, I'll always be happy to answer all your questions.' Naseer seemed relieved and even tried to ask her fewer questions over the next day or two but, but by the next week the questions were back to full throttle and seemed to be getting even more repetitive and time consuming...

Anxiety in school – What does it look like?

- Asking to go to the nurse's office
- Asking to call parents
- Pacing
- Hand-wringing
- Clinging to parents or caregivers
- Crying when asked to speak in front of the class
- Hiding under desks when significantly distressed
- Argumentativeness
- Seeking frequent reassurance/assistance
- Staying alone during free time (e.g., recess, lunch)
- Complaining of being tired and asking for breaks to rest
- Idiosyncratic ritualistic or repetitive behaviors
- Difficulty concentrating
- Complaining of not being able to remember or understand new information
- Not wanting to try, 'self-sabotaging'
- Refusing to transition
- Tantrums (particularly in younger children)
- Oppositional behaviors such as refusing to go to another class or complete an assignment
- Aggression, lashing out
- Wearing headphones or hood

Anxiety accommodation at school

- Allow to leave class a few minutes early to avoid crowds
- Allow to leave room when showing video of health info
- Certain books or class material removed
- Providing repeated reassurance, spending lots of time answering questions
- Extended time for perfectionism/procrastinators
- Psychologists write not to call on kid in class
- Presentation via zoom privately with teacher
- Allowed to stay home during the day
- Allowed to leave early
- Allowed to avoid reading aloud
- Allowed to avoid oral presentation
- Teacher calling/texting mom
- Counselor allows child to sit in office during recess, lunch, or gatherings
- Remote learning
- Nurse calling mom to pick child up
- Complete assignments at home for full grade
- Special routine for school drop-off or transition
- Skipping bus rides and class trips

Do school-based accommodations of anxiety help?

- **Martel et al., 2022:** Over 500 youth with anxiety disorders (K – 12th grade) and their mothers
  - Having an IEP or 504 plan did *not* lessen the impact of anxiety on school-related impairment.

- **Ginsburg et al., 2021:** 31 elementary school students with problematic anxiety (ages 5 – 11) and their teachers
  - All teachers engaged in some form of accommodation more than one day a week
  - Teachers who reported engaging in more accommodating behaviors had students with higher avoidance and anxiety.

Increasing "support"

"I know presentations make you nervous, and I believe you can handle that **feeling**!"

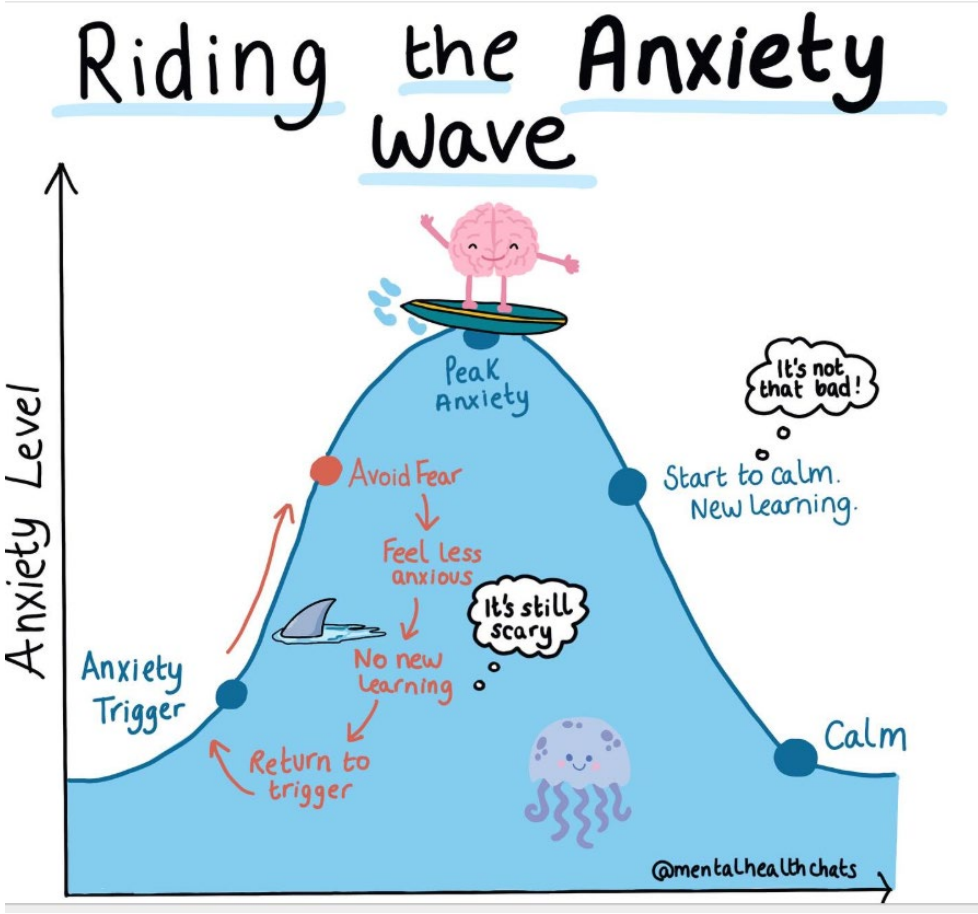
Why does support matter?

Situation	Protective	Demanding	Supportive
Child is scared to join others at recess	Teacher tells him it's okay to sit out, sits with child	Teacher tells him to go join, all the other kids could do it	Teacher says it can be hard to join other kids, but they believe the child can handle hard things
Child has a meltdown when it's time to start the test	Teacher says child can skip the test, and spend it in the calming corner	Teacher says behavior is unacceptable, sends child to the principal's office	Teacher says that they see the child is feeling worried, and they know they know the feelings will fade

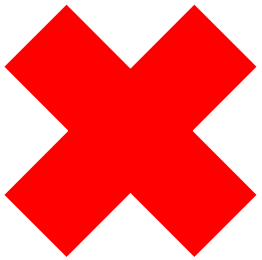
Are other anxiety coping tools consistent with support?

- Mindfulness/relaxation
  - Music
  - Breathing
  - Visualization
- Calming corners/wellness centers
  - Stuffed animals
  - Fidgets
  - Bean bags
  - Sensory boxes

Goal is not to FIX anxiety.
Child WILL be okay, even with anxiety.



Are accommodations consistent with support?



Send the message anxiety is not acceptable or safe; promote avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations

Send the message anxiety is acceptable and can be tolerated; promote approach toward anxiety-provoking situations

Reducing unhelpful accommodations

- Clearly identify what the accommodation is (e.g., excusing a student from a presentation)

- Decide what you *will* and *will not* do instead that feels like a meaningful step forward (e.g., I will not excuse you from the presentation, but for this next one I am happy to practice with you first, let you tape it, etc.)

Bea & Naseer

Points to consider:

- Is Naseer's behavior anxiety?
- Could Bea convey support? ("don't worry, I'll always be happy to answer all your questions")
- Is Bea answering all of Naseer's questions a helpful or unhelpful accommodation?
- Should we focus on making Naseer change HIS behavior?

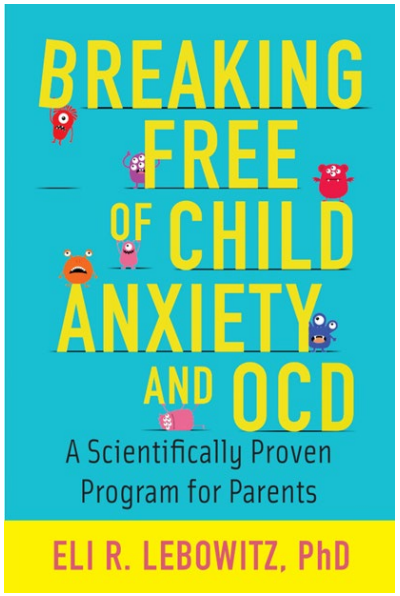
Bea & Naseer → a SPACE-informed approach

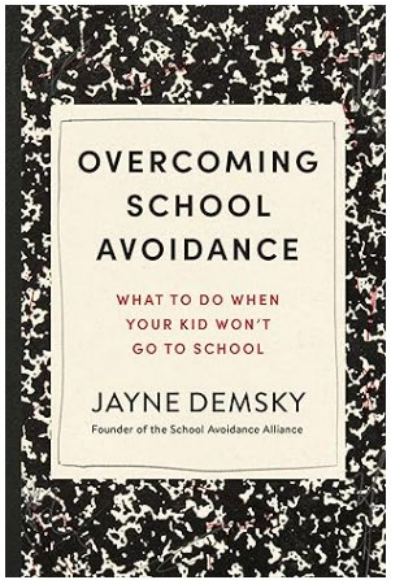
Convey acceptance and care for Naseer's anxiety and distress	"You feel pretty worried" "That's making you anxious"
Convery belief in Naseer's ability to handle anxiety and distress	"I'm sure you *can* handle those feelings"
Send a clear message about how Beatriz will/will not respond	"I'm going to trust you to do your best without my going over it again" "This week, I'll only answer 1 question"

Resources

- www.spacetreatment.net
  - Articles, podcasts, videos, forums, info about trainings, and more…

- Books to guide parents through SPACE and other school issues





Resources

- Anxiety & Mood Disorders Program
  - 203-737-4644 or anxiety.csc@yale.edu

New clinical trial of SPACE for parents of teens 14-17 years

THANK YOU!