

# 1

---

## “DOING TOO MUCH IS AS RISKY AS DOING TOO LITTLE”

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s much-cited serenity prayer on the opposite page precisely frames the modern parent’s dilemma: no matter how hard you try, you can’t eliminate risk. You can’t know *all* the actions you could take that might make your family a little safer, and even if you could, you’d never find the time to accomplish such a herculean task. In fact, you would only increase the anxiety levels of your children, your spouse, and yourself. As our research makes clear, the solution lies in having the wisdom to know where the line between action and acceptance lies. This book is about finding that line.

The task is not simple, as Margaret Delano knows well:

### MOTHERING IS NO PIECE OF CAKE

An intelligent and creative person, Margaret is known for her sympathetic nature. If you’re having a problem, she’s the one you look to. Margaret runs a small mail order business from her home that she started eleven years ago. She designs, produces, and markets greeting cards. She was not an easy-going woman in the past, but since the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart, she sees the world as a much more threatening place.

She and her husband, Dave, have three children. Helen is sixteen, Jimmy is ten, and Colette is five. Margaret worries about each of them. When she takes Colette to the park, she

seldom talks to the other women there. She is nervous that she'll be distracted for a moment and someone will snatch her daughter. Although she realizes this is unlikely, she doesn't want to take any chances.

Margaret used to let Jimmy play baseball in the afternoon with his friends, but then she learned that a man was arrested for trying to sell marijuana at Jimmy's middle school. She now insists that Jimmy come straight home at the end of school, which causes frequent arguments between them. Although her daughter Helen considers herself to be independent, Margaret tries to protect her with regular warnings. She suspects that behind her back, Helen usually disregards her cautions. She is right. Helen thinks her mother is an excessive worrier who is more overprotective than her friends' mothers.

Whenever one of the kids has a class trip or excursion, Margaret often takes time off from work to be one of the chaperones. She lets her parents or her in-laws drive the kids only when absolutely necessary. She thinks that at their age, they are unlikely to be safe drivers.

Dave, Margaret's husband, occasionally gets irritated by what he views as Margaret's excessive concern. He knows life presents certain dangers, but he thinks her belief that catastrophe is just around the corner makes matters worse. "There's really not much we can do. Can't you just relax?" has become his mantra. Although he loves Margaret deeply and wants to be supportive, Dave often feels frustrated by his inability to make suggestions she can accept.

Margaret wants to be more relaxed about life. She knows there is a high price to pay for her constant vigilance. She feels resentful that the job of protecting loved ones and watching for trouble rests squarely on her shoulders. Yet she also knows that her apprehension is excessive. She is aware that her attitude is driving a wedge between Helen and her. And perhaps worst of all, the two younger kids are developing into worrywarts. Jimmy's sleep is increasingly

fitful, and she can't help noticing that Colette is reluctant to try anything new.

“I know I can't protect them from every possible danger,” she thinks, “but I can't just turn a blind eye to the risks out there either. I just wish I knew if we're doing enough—or maybe too much!”

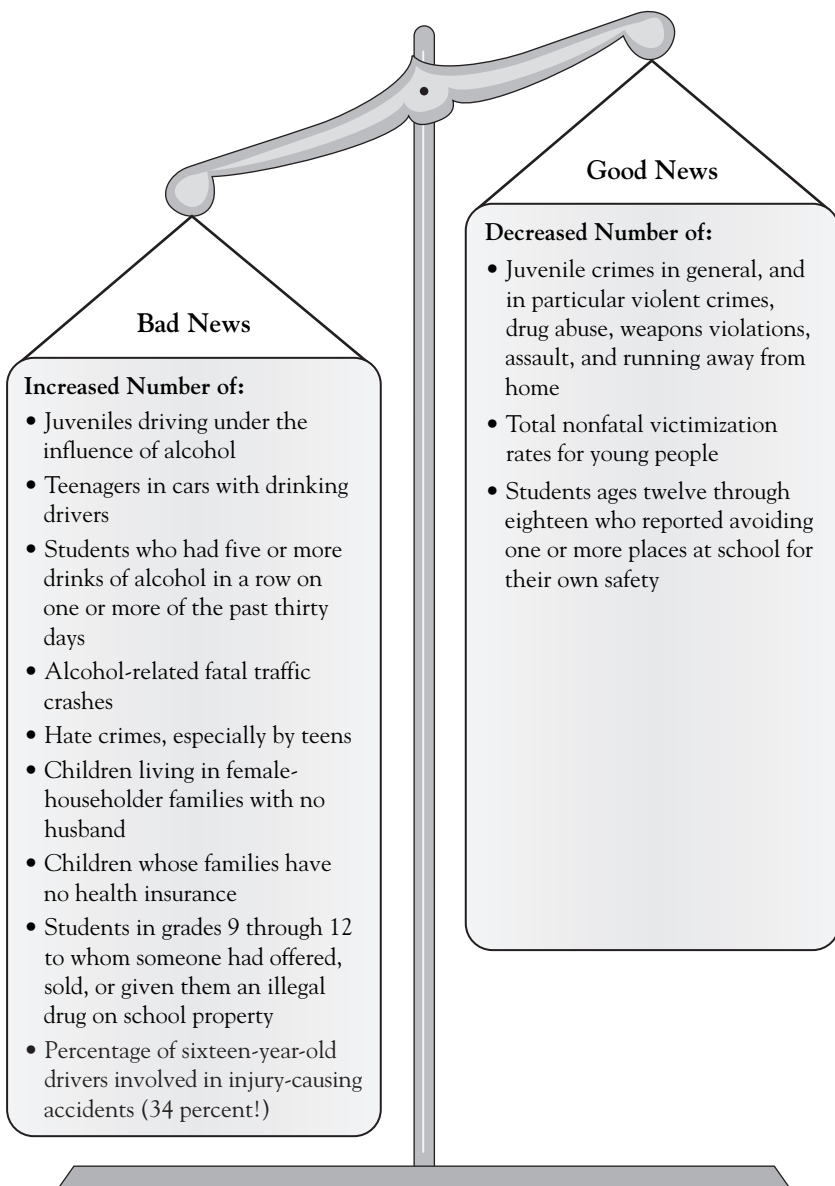
## A MOTHER'S EIGHT MAIN CONCERNS

First, let us say that we would prefer to address this book to male and female parents, but as most research makes clear, it is mothers who take on primary responsibility for the safety of their children. Some fathers contribute significantly, but moms, for good or ill, are much more likely to shoulder this particular responsibility. You mothers are the ones telling pollsters that you are more worried now than ever before. It's no wonder that you are because, objectively, the world has become more dangerous. One might think if you're not a worried mom, you haven't been paying attention. A careful perusal of recent Census Bureau statistics indicates that although some things have improved in our world, there really are more dangers out there, as you can see in Figure 1.1.

When our book, *Your Anxious Child*, was published in 2000, no one could have anticipated the flood of alarming news and tragic events that occurred in subsequent years. Yet in a post-9/11, around-the-clock news culture, we are bombarded with images and messages about threats to our families—everything from mad cow disease and avian flu to kids suffocating in the trunks of cars and teens being abducted in the tropics. There is the ever-present danger of global terrorism and the impending likelihood of another domestic terrorist attack. Even the weather appears to be going haywire. It comes as no surprise that the surgeon general recently reported that 13 percent of children in this country have a diagnosable anxiety disorder—a 30 percent increase from ten years ago.

A recent Roper poll confirms these trends. According to Roper, parents voiced eight primary concerns related to the well-being of

FIGURE 1.1. The Good News/Bad News Scale



their families: weather emergencies, kidnapping, terrorism, inappropriate media influences, drugs and alcohol, child abuse, school violence, and home safety. Furthermore, we now know that the more diligent a parent is about defending the family from these dangers, the more likely she or he is to suffer from a serious anxiety reaction. Sadly, it seems that the harder parents try to keep their children safe, the greater the chance is that they will pass their fears on to their children. Life is a question of balancing costs and benefits, and nowhere is this truer than in facing the newest challenges to our equanimity.

For the past four years, we have led teams of our students at Boston College and Lesley University to help us investigate the nature of these threats and survey the multitudinous lists of possible solutions for dealing with each of them. Forty students, mostly at the graduate level, have assisted us in conducting research on this topic. We have examined studies of precisely how dangerous these perils are, in what ways they threaten families, and recommendations for diminishing the risks they represent. We have sifted through the newest literature on how anxiety can best be reduced in the face of real perils. Finally, we have interviewed dozens of parents (mostly mothers) to get their reaction to this information and to have them share dramatic stories about how they overcame—or felt overwhelmed by—the threats they perceived or experienced in their lives.

Through our search of the literature, we have discovered that in addition to these eight threats to the family, there are a number of other crosscurrents that cause stress for mothers. When you understand these changes, you can see why many of you feel more threatened than your mothers and grandmothers did. These are the major shifts:

- *Role overload.* Being a woman in a Western culture, you are increasingly affected by an overload of responsibilities. Because many of you raise a family and are employed full time, there is a distinct onus on mothers to do both. Most women today work outside

the home more than their mothers did. Studies indicate that the average mother with a full-time job outside the home also does between 65 and 85 percent of the housework. There are only so many hours in the day, but if you are a typical mother, you are also expected to spend a lot of time with each of your children. If you can't, you feel guilty. You may also feel that you have to compensate for your busy husband, who often works extra hours too. Men typically work fifty-one hours per week in this country and women forty-one, the longest workweeks in the world. The average father spends less than thirty minutes a day of one-on-one interaction with his children, about one-third as much as the mother. This pressure is reflected in the number of mothers who work full time. For those with a child under age one, the percentage declined from 59 percent in 1997 to 53 percent in 2002, and for those with a child under age three, the percentages for those two years dropped from 61 to 58.

- *Perfection overload.* There is also the common belief that whatever our children do, they must do it as perfectly as possible: the best grades, the most activities, and so on. Otherwise, it is said, they will be disadvantaged and will fall behind in a race for the top that is all too real. This is a problem for mothers also. As Judith Warner documents in her new book, *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (2006), an essential part of this myth is that it demands the suppression of a mother's personal ambitions. If you want some success yourself at anything other than being a perfect mother, goes the myth, you ought to feel ashamed of your selfishness.

- *The hurried family.* Psychologist David Elkind's best-selling book, *The Hurried Child* (2001), received a lot of attention when it was first published in 1981. In this book, he argued that modern parents try to force their children to be "superkids," excessively bent on perfection in every area of their lives. Today we need to be concerned for the hurried *family*. After-school hours and weekends are now filled with so many organized activities there is virtually no time for unplanned and unstructured moments to spend together. No time is wasted. Children in such families need adults to arrange and conduct their interactions (hence the so-called soccer mom).

They are more dependent on their mothers than kids were in previous generations, another factor making your role as mother more stressful.

- “*Scientific parenting.*” There has been a plethora of scientific articles and books in recent years on the nature of human development. Most of this research has been on the brain, but other aspects have been studied as well. Even worse, many authors try to persuade us that their *recommendations* for parenting are scientific and irrefutable. (If only every child came with his or her own personal instruction manual.) Nevertheless, mothers who have been reading these books frequently believe that there is one right way to parent, if only they could figure it out!

- *Increasing age of mother at birth of child.* Average maternal age at childbirth has been increasing. If you are in your thirties, forties, or fifties, you probably have less energy and endurance than you did in your twenties, two assets that are essential to this vocation of motherhood. Older mothers often speak of the strain of keeping up with their active kids all day.

- *Shrinking family size.* The size of the average American family has been steadily shrinking. When the family is smaller, mothers can attend to each child more easily. As a result, children have less independent time and are more likely to be dependent on their mothers in many ways. This “learned helplessness” may also make your role more difficult. True, you probably have fewer children than your grandmother did, but you are also likely to have significantly less help.

- *Lack of extended family help.* Extended family members (grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins) are no longer likely to live nearby. This means that you probably have less help than mothers in the past, which puts more pressure on you. It has been said, “Only six people can raise a child.” In other words, the only people who are intrinsically vested enough in a child to get really excited about his or her accomplishments are the child’s parents and grandparents. Also, the counsel of extended family members who know your children well may be more helpful than advice from others.

Together, these forces certainly put pressure on you. They may color your evaluation of how dangerous your environment is. Would you like to get insight into just how much the threats in your world are bothering you personally?

## YOUR AQ (ANXIETY QUOTIENT)

To calculate your level of anxiety, decide which of four categories best describes how each of the following statements is like you: VLM = very like me, LM = like me, NLM = not like me, and VUM = very unlike me. (It doesn't have to be something you actually do; it just has to be something that sounds like your values.) When you have picked the category that best describes your attitude toward the statement, circle the number next to the question. For example, if statement 2 is like you, circle 2 on that line. When you are done, add up your total score.

<i>Statements</i>	<i>VLM</i>	<i>LM</i>	<i>NLM</i>	<i>VUM</i>
1. I believe my child should be seated in the safest place in the classroom.	4	3	2	1
2. I would let my ten-year-old son go on a scout campout in winter if I were confident the leader would pay attention to weather and other dangers.	1	2	3	4
3. It would be a good idea to get plans for making a chemical safe room in my house in case of a germ warfare attack.	4	3	2	1

<i>Statements</i>	<i>VLM</i>	<i>LM</i>	<i>NLM</i>	<i>VUM</i>
4. Before I open the door of my car at night, I look in the back seat with the flashlight that I carry with me.	4	3	2	1
5. I would buy a computer program that would let me monitor my fifteen-year-old daughter's incoming and outgoing e-mails.	4	3	2	1
6. I would allow my thirteen-year-old son to take the train into the city to go shopping if he's with a friend.	1	2	3	4
7. I believe that storing gallons and gallons of bottled water is really quite unnecessary.	1	2	3	4
8. I have no idea how the electrical system in our house works.	1	2	3	4
9. I would absolutely monitor my daughter's diary if I thought she might be doing something that would compromise her safety.	4	3	2	1
10. On rare occasions, I have ducked into a store while one of the kids was sitting in the car.	1	2	3	4

*(Continued)*

<i>Statements</i>	<i>VLM</i>	<i>LM</i>	<i>NLM</i>	<i>VUM</i>
11. I really feel that most movie moguls ought to be ashamed of themselves for profiting so much from featuring sex, violence, and stereotypes.	4	3	2	1
12. I am absolutely certain that I know what movies my children are seeing.	4	3	2	1
13. I think it just makes sense to avoid people who have a foreign appearance.	4	3	2	1
14. I have no fear of attending events that are crowded.	1	2	3	4
15. I would be happy if my children never took a single drink their whole lives.	4	3	2	1
16. I am against all the bans on alcohol advertising; they are anti-capitalistic and anti-American.	1	2	3	4
17. I have a lot of doubts about the ability of schools to keep our kids safe.	4	3	2	1
18. One of the greatest dangers our children face today is from drug dealers.	4	3	2	1
19. The violence in video games like Grand Theft Auto is no worse than what				

<i>Statements</i>	<i>VLM</i>	<i>LM</i>	<i>NLM</i>	<i>VUM</i>
kids see on television every night of the week.	1	2	3	4
20. Most teachers have no idea of how to deal with violent students.	4	3	2	1
21. You are more likely to get hit by lightning than you are to be injured in a terrorist attack.	1	2	3	4

### TOTAL SCORE

The lowest possible score, 21, indicates that you are probably a rather relaxed, nonworrying person. The highest score, 84, indicates that you’re quite anxious about the dangers in the world. If your score is above 42, we recommend that you seriously consider carrying out as many of the activities offered in Chapters Ten and Eleven as you and your family can.

You may also want to check on your level of anxiety for each of the threats to safety. You can compile that score by adding up your numbers by threat type. For home safety, look at numbers 3, 7, and 8; for terrorism, 13, 14, and 21; for school violence, 1, 17, and 20; for media influence, 11, 12, and 19; for drugs and alcohol, 15, 16, and 18; for child abuse, 2, 5, and 9; and for abduction, 4, 6, and 10.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

Whether your score on the AQ Test is moderate or astronomical, our recommendation is the same: if you and your family hope to confront the threats successfully (and if you as the mother want to handle the societal pressures we described), you must achieve three goals:

1. *You must make certain that your family has taken all reasonable precautions to protect yourselves in each of the eight areas.* This book will inform you about the existing level of threat in each case and will teach you precisely how to protect yourselves according to the advice of the best experts. However, many of the people we have interviewed and counseled have tried so hard to protect their children that they have actually made their situations more stressful (remember Margaret's story at the beginning of this chapter?). Therefore you also need to recognize that keeping your family safe can be a consuming task. You will need to know where to draw the line and where to strike a balance. Therefore, we will point out the kinds of actions that experts consider excessive as well.

2. *Over time, working to strengthen the family's safety will reduce each member's level of fear.* In the short run, however, it is likely to evoke strong emotions. Involving children in safety plans often makes them more fearful because they become more aware of the many dangers that exist. Safety planning will doubtless cause an even stronger fear reaction in children who already have a proclivity toward anxiety. Therefore, we have provided a series of techniques that are designed to help alleviate fear, in children and in teens, and we are tailoring the exercises for each step to apply to a threat area. These antianxiety exercises will help your kids avoid becoming overwhelmed by the family's preparations. You will find them in Chapter Ten. We urge you to dip into this chapter as you make your safety preparations. Don't wait to avail your family of these techniques until you have completed your safety arrangements. Your children are likely to benefit from them most if they are carried out from time to time as you do this work.

3. *Allay your own fears, and build family cohesion.* You and your partner are likely to experience some anxiety as a result of this work as well. Thus, we have devised a series of powerful activities you can use to do this. This third aspect of our approach is essential, since parents' fears almost always exacerbate those of their children. These adult activities are in Chapter Eleven. As with the child-

oriented activities, we urge you to refer to Chapter Eleven from time to time, especially if you or your partner experience anxious reactions to this work.

## THE COPE PROGRAM

The anxiety-reduction methods for children in this book, and to some extent those for adults, follow the nationally tested COPE regimen. For the past twenty years, John Dacey has been experimenting with techniques for helping children and adolescents increase their self-control over their study habits and their ability to avoid using drugs. Lisa Fiore has joined him in this work for the past five years. During this time, the approach has been adapted specifically to alleviate anxiety problems. The letters in the acronym COPE stand for the four steps that make up the method:

**C** = Calming the nervous system

**O** = Originating an imaginative plan

**P** = Persisting in the face of obstacles and failure

**E** = Evaluating the plan

What we have discovered through our teaching, therapy work, and research studies is that most people, regardless of age, have similar problems when they deal with situations that are anxiety provoking. Most respond well to the four steps of COPE.

### Calming the Nervous System

The first problem most of us confront when we enter a stressful situation is the stimulation of the fight-or-flight response. This is the ancient human tendency when under assault to either attack the antagonist or run away. In prehistoric times, this response was most functional; when Neanderthal humans were being eyed by a saber-toothed tiger

as a possible lunch, standing around and thinking up alternative plans would have been fatal. Today, however, most situations that scare children cannot be resolved by simply running away or attacking. For example, as your child stands up in front of a class to make a presentation, she may feel like leaving, or she may feel angry with her classmates who are staring at her. What she needs to do is quell this neurological response to stress so that she can think clearly about what it is she wants to say and how she wants to say it. A calm nervous system, not a highly aroused one, is what she needs when dealing with most modern stressors.

In this book we cover different strategies for calming the nervous system. Some of them are physical, some mental, some a combination of the two, and some involve spiritual approaches. We provide numerous activities that your child may use to achieve tranquility.

## **Originating an Imaginative Plan**

The second problem that anxious people often face is that even when calm, they often have faulty understandings of their feelings and why they have them. Furthermore, because they are under such pressure, they may be unable to think of really imaginative plans for dealing with their quandaries. Anxious children are less likely than others to have imaginative ideas about the best way to problem-solve, even though, with their vibrant imaginations, they often have greater creative potential. However, if they have calmed down their nervous systems, they can use the techniques that we teach to develop better insights into themselves and design an imaginative plan for dealing with their problem.

Research has identified a number of thinking strategies and styles that are much more likely to produce creative problem solving. We offer numerous activities that are aimed at helping you and your child to become better problem solvers. As you and she learn these techniques, you both will improve your ability to design a plan that will combat her anxiety.

## Persisting in the Face of Obstacles and Failure

We have found that many plans for dealing with anxiety start out well, but then the person loses faith. The temptation to quit blossoms, and soon she gives up on her plan. A number of scholars have shown that people who believe in God or some other higher power or supernatural force are more likely to persevere when the going gets tough. Anxious children are especially prone to throwing in the towel. We offer a variety of paths that can be taken to help your child have faith in herself, her plan, and her “higher power.” Among these paths is a new one about which we are very excited: techniques for designing your own family rituals that, when faithfully attended to, are proving to be powerful anxiety fighters.

## Evaluating the Plan

Although having faith in your plan is important, whether it is really working is critical to your success. We recommend evaluation techniques be used both while the plan is in operation and after the plan has been carried out, so that improvements can be constructed. We suggest a number of ways you can get objective feedback on the efficacy of your plan.



As the mother of a modern family, you face a daunting task. You need to discern what actions to take to make your family safe, without overdoing it to the point that you and they become overwhelmed with fears and general anxiety. You need a unified strategy that is neither overly cautious nor irresponsibly inattentive. This applies not only to what you do but also to how you do it. A brilliant plan that your children cannot comprehend, or one that your partner doesn't like, may be worse than no plan at all. You need a strategy that makes sense within the context of your lives, one that

makes each of you feel confident and leaves you and your family with an enthusiastic view of life. We sincerely hope and believe that with some adjustments for your family's personal preferences, the concepts and activities in this book will guide you all safely and soundly to that goal.