



Parenting a child with OCD: Sorting strategies for parents

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Parenting is a monumental undertaking. It's tough to sort out what's safe from what's dangerous, what's going to keep your child happy from what she needs to prepare her for the reality of life. OCD is difficult to sort. When your curious toddler explores electrical outlets, it is clear what to do - "That's dangerous, stop" - so basic, so simple. Now, when your child is squeezing out tubes of toothpaste to get to the elusive "clean" part of the middle, or washing her hands beyond raw, or staying up till 2.00am trying to get a night-time ritual just right, what do you do? It's no longer so simple. Obviously, if "Stop, danger!" worked, there would be no OCD. The danger in OCD doesn't seem external, nor is it exactly coming from your child. It's hard to sort out where to target your parenting efforts. A key component to successful treatment for OCD in kids is externalising the OCD, making it the common enemy that parents and children can band together to fight against. One thing is clear: when parents get stuck, kids get stuck. Parents, in order to help their kids, have to "unstuck" themselves first in order to be any help. What follows are some questions that address the where and

how to target your attention as the parent of a child with OCD.

Where is My Child, Where Is the OCD?

It's 10.30pm, your child has been in the bathroom for an hour repeatedly counting the tiles in sets of 10. A natural reaction might be, "Hey, get into bed now, " but rituals don't let go so easily. The key is to not confuse your child with the OCD, and they won't end up stressed and more stuck or angry and needing to defend the symptoms to save face. It's not really your pride and joy, the child you cherish, who is intentionally disobeying the rules. Visualise the "OCD Monster" with a grip around your child. This may help you to say, "Looks like you're having trouble getting out of the bathroom How can I help you get to bed."

What's Support, What's Enabling?

Parents often feel manipulated by their child. It helps to remember that when your child asks you for help with an obsession or ritual, it may be the best way he can figure out how to get out of the "mess" he's in. Acknowledge the effort/ingenuity but only do what you feel comfortable with. So, when your child needs you to return a new pair of shoes for the third time because they may be contaminated, consider the following formula:

(1) Acknowledge - It seems like this is hard for you.

(2) Label - This seems like the OCD has really got you stuck.

(3) Set limits on your help - If I return the shoes, I think I'll be helping the OCD and not helping you.

(4) Propose an alternative - Let's figure out how we can get you unstuck right now. (Remember, as parents, there will be times when you decide to acquiesce, and that's OK - See "Choosing your Battles" below).

What's a Slip, What's a Crash?

It can be disheartening when a previously mastered problem behaviour returns. After weeks of being able to eat food without first seeing it unwrapped from the package, suddenly your child once again won't drink the orange juice because the safety seal has been removed. It may seem that all the progress your child has made has gone out the window. Think of it as a slip. Slips happen. Slips are a part of life; address them as quickly as you can and you'll get back on track. Don't spend time adding meaning to the slip by blaming yourself or your child; look to tomorrow. Remember that such factors as fatigue, stress, excitement, or illness can lead to slips. Try to predict when slips may happen, so that they won't get the better of you. Then, empathise with your child's discouragement, but remind yourself and your child that progress is often one step forward, two steps back. Model "imperfection" in yourself, in your child's heroes - ball players may strike out several times, but are still on the team, and go back and try again.

Who Needs Help Right Now, Me or My Child?

Seeing your child struggling with OCD can bring out feelings of anger, shame, and guilt. Perhaps you yourself struggle with OCD, or you flash back to the pain of your youth and want the problem to just go away. You may need the OCD to be invisible in order for you to be reassured that your child is "normal." What are alternatives to adding your distress to the list of challenges your child is already juggling? Take time out. Tell your child, "I'm

having trouble dealing with this right now, I'll be back." Run, walk, punch the pillow, eat ice cream, talk to your dog. It's honest, responsible, and when you come back, you'll be in better shape to help. If you miss the "time out" window and let the frustration speak, go back and apologise. Let your child see that you, too, can make mistakes, forgive yourself, and move on.

Spark or Wildfire: How Much Help Does My Child Need Right Now?

Help your child have as much say in her treatment at home as possible. What looks like a crisis to you may feel to your child like an opportunity to test his fighting power. Set up a communication system with your child so he can tell you how rough a time he's having and whether or not he wants your help. Use a "fear thermometer" - 0-30 means I can handle it, 70-100 means I'm really stuck. Or ask him to give you signals like red light (stay away, I'm OK), green light (come help me now), yellow light (stand by, I may need you).

Choose Your Battles: Do You Attack the OCD, Recede, or Compromise?

Flexibility is an important life skill. While your ultimate goal is to help your child defeat the OCD, there's a time and a place for everything. At 2.00am, it may be time to tell your child to "give it over" to the OCD, let it win this time so she can go to bed. Other times, your child may be more ready to fight the OCD. Before a stressful event like a test at school or a soccer game, you may want to compromise with the OCD - use an egg timer and designate 10 minutes for rituals.

What Is Worth it: Sorting the Pros and Cons of Challenging Activities.

Facing a challenge - a sleep-over, a horseback-riding show, a prom - may often have some backlash with fatigue and slips following. Help your child identify the pros and cons of having participated in the activity, and understanding whether it was worth it to them. Sometimes your child may decide that it's worth it to participate in activities to ward off feeling trapped by the OCD. Help your child to see partial successes. What part of

the experience was fun or went well? What can you learn from it? Should your child limit herself to one activity a weekend in order to have needed recovery time? If you approach this process as an experiment to learn from, your child is less likely to think in terms of black and white categories of success or failure.

Setting Limits Vs. Abandoning Your Child.

Many parents struggle with the feeling that when they set limits by not accommodating the OCD, they are leaving their child to suffer alone. Certainly, it is hard to see your child in pain, but remember, if you get pulled in too, that won't help anybody. So, if your child has a lengthy prayer ritual before a meal, let her know that you are going to begin eating after one prayer so the food doesn't get cold, and encourage her to join in when she can. If everyone makes room for the OCD, it will be the house guest who never leaves. It's important to take care of your needs. If one morning you have to leave for work and NO strategy has worked for freeing your child from the OCD, leave for work, provided your child is safe at home. The feeling may be "I'm abandoning him," but what you've done is set a limit on the OCD in your life. Language is important here. When you leave, acknowledge how tough it must be for your child, and let your child know why you need to leave and that you'll work together when you get back.

Who Is the Boss of the OCD: You or Your Child?

In order to restore as much control as possible to your child, remember that kids should choose their own OCD challenges for the week. If he wants to let you in on the homework to get your support, fine, but let him be the boss. Sometimes parents decide to tell their child how they should work on the OCD. Parents may get enthusiastic about their child's progress and suggest they just try to "stop everything" today. Generally, this is not advisable. Setting up unrealistic goals will lead to feelings of failure all around. Certainly, if a ritual is impinging on a parent's life, this needs to be addressed. Talk to your

child's therapist for time-limiting strategies (e.g., using an egg timer) or other interim solutions.

Be realistic with these suggestions! As parents, we all have good days and bad. Parenting is not judged by "snapshots," but by the feature-length film. Next time you feel stuck, try to sort out what you are seeing, who you are trying to help, and how you are doing it. You may be more effective if you've identified where the problem is at the moment. A final note on the sorting issue. When you are stuck, draw on your creativity - help your child sneak around the OCD, outsmart it, make protest signs, make scary voices, assert power. This will help your child learn how to not get stuck and how to stay clear of hopelessness.