

Supporting The Anxious Child

By Colleen Drobot

One day my 10-year old son came home shaken by an incident he experienced in the woods. He had gone biking with some neighbourhood boys and an older brother of one of his friends. In the forest, they came upon a group of angry teenagers who were arguing, and on the verge of a fight. As my son described the scene, I could sense that the violence in the air must have been palpable. Luckily, the brave 15-year-old accompanying my son stepped up and said, "*Hey you guys, take it somewhere else. There are kids here!*" Fortunately, the group actually listened. One of them mumbled "*Sorry dude*" and they left.

After we talked a bit about the incident that evening, my son fell asleep and I thought that was the end of the story. But over the next few days, he started asking me if I had locked the car and house and he'd go back to check even after I assured him I did. Also new was that he seemed over-focused on his sister's safety, worrying that she might get run over by a car. One day while out in the backyard gardening, we saw an older teenager in our alley. My son reached over for a sharp gardening tool and handed it to me, saying, "*Here Mom, take this.*" Confused, I asked him why? His eyes glanced at the teen and he said, "*Just in case...*". Then it hit me like a ton of bricks. He was alarmed because of the danger he sensed in the forest. "*Honey,*" I said, "*I think I know why you have worrying about the family's safety so much lately! It's because of the teenagers you saw fighting!*" He nodded with a haunted look.

We both became aware of the connection once I said it. His

alarm was high and he had become hyper-vigilant about safety, much the same way we all had to be thousands of years ago in case we were attacked by a saber-toothed tiger. But children were never meant to be the ones to keep the village safe; that has always been reserved for adults. A child's brain needs all its energy for growing and therefore it must be freed from daily alarm. As adults we need to provide rest for the child so that growth can occur.

I needed to help my son find psychological rest. After learning from Dr. Neufeld for a number of years, I knew I had to convince my son that he was safe with me; he could rest in me being in charge. Right there in the garden I told him that it was his dad's and my job to keep him and the family safe. I told him very firmly that his job as a child was to play and grow. He nodded and relaxed visibly. That night once again we talked about what happened in the forest. He asked me if he could do something to erase the images in his brain. I told him that it was wonderful he could talk to his dad and me about it, that his feelings were natural, and I shared a time I had witnessed something similar and had felt the same way. "*You too?*" he asked. He was relieved to know he wasn't the only one. I assured him that the more he gave us his problems, the more his brain would come to rest; that when we share scary things with others whom we trust, it helps us heal. He got teary and hugged me as he remembered more of the details. All the while I held him and told him I was there for him. We talked a bit more the next night with more tears. The following week I checked in with him and he said he could remember everything but he didn't feel scared or sick when he thought about it. Now, he only had the memory. All his hyper-vigilance around safety disappeared and he became playful and carefree again.

I was grateful for what I've learned from Dr. Neufeld

regarding anxiety. We don't always know what spooks our kids. We cannot always control the scary or upsetting experiences they have. But the answer is the same no matter how traumatic the experience; we keep working at the attachment so they trust us, we normalize their feelings, we take the lead and show how strong we are, we let them know that they are safe in our presence and we convey unequivocally that *we will take care of them*.