

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Taming the Inner Worrier

IS WORRY PASSED from generation to generation? A mother who was concerned about her daughter Lucy's worries confessed that her family includes some "super worriers" who "went crazy" from their obsessive fear. She wondered if her daughter had inherited this genetic trait the same way she had her blue eyes and curly hair.

Though most children worry sometimes, it is true that those with highly sensitive temperaments like the little girl in question tend to feel things more deeply. They may feel temporarily traumatized by an event that might upset another child only briefly. Children are born with particular temperaments that parents have to learn work with, but there are ways to help any child learn to cope with anxiety about the future.

In 2003 Candlewick Press published a charming, insightful picture book by Rosemary Wells called *Felix and the Worrier*. She depicts Felix's worries as coming from a little gremlin (though not a scary) figure who taps on his window at night, bringing up subjects that will occupy him fearfully the whole night. This seems an especially helpful approach because Felix doesn't have to think of himself as a worried person.

As a child gets older, we can explain that the Worrier is only part of our own mind that tries to steer us into fearful thinking. *Taming Your Inner Gremlin*, a book that helps adults combat the inner voices that supply self-criticism, is not only a bestseller but the inspiration for an institute that works with individuals and corporations.

Children and adults CAN learn to talk back to their inner worrier by saying things like "I'm not worried about the test. I'm studying hard and I will do well on it." Countering the negative suggestions our minds make has proven to be one of the most effective strategies for change. In 1987, Dr. Wendy Ritchey (one our school's board members) and I wrote a book on teaching children positive self-talk called *I Think I Can, I Know I Can*.

Felix doesn't speak up to the Worrier, but he does ignore the gremlin's fearful incantations when he finds something much more interesting to capture his mental energy. Felix gets a puppy for his birthday and concentrates on his delight rather than suggestions that dogs are scary. Putting our minds on a subject that interests us is an effective way to channel our minds away from worry. Techniques for relaxing the body also help release negative thoughts.

We want children to know that worry is common and that they needn't feel bad for having fears. We don't want to make children feel silly or label them as worriers. Research shows that saying "I understand" is even more powerful than reassurance. Most importantly, we can talk to them about ways we lift ourselves out of the winds of worry and concentrate on the wonder of right now.

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