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## **PARENTING A CHILD WITH O.C.D. SORTING STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS**

Parenting is a monumental undertaking, all the more so when your child has OCD. A key component to successful treatment for OCD in kids is externalizing the OCD, making it the common foe that parents and children can band together to fight against. But it can still be a struggle weaving together the challenge of fighting OCD and managing everyday life. One thing is clear: when parents get stuck, kids get stuck. So, to help in the process, 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 10:30 pm. 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 symptom to save face. It's not really your child, whom you love and cherish, who is intentionally disobeying you. Visualize 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 s/he can figure out how to get out of the "mess" s/he's in.

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 find 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' next)

## **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 2:00 a.m., it may be time to tell your child to "give it over" to the OCD, let it be this time so s/he can go to bed. Other times, your child may be more ready to stand up to the OCD. Before a stressful event like a test at school or a sports event, you may want to compromise with the OCD-use an egg timer and designate 10 minutes for rituals.

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

It can be disheartening when 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 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 tiredness, 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 empathize with your child's discouragement, but remind yourself and your child that progress is often two steps forward, one back. Use imperfection in yourself or in your child's heroes – sports players often have an off day, seem to slip back but go on and try again.

## **Spark or Wildfire, How Much Help Does My Child Need Right Now?**

Help your child have as much say in his/her treatment at home as possible. What seems like a crisis to you may feel to your child like an opportunity to test the fighting power. Set up a communication system with your child so they can tell you how tough a time they're having and whether or not they want your help. Yes a 'feet thermometer' where zero to 3 means, "I can handle it", 7 – 10 means "I'm pretty stuck". Or ask them to give you signals like red light ("stay away I'm OK") green light ("come help me now") or yellow light (stand by, I may need you")

## **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." And 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 apologize. Let your child see that you, too, can make mistakes, forgive yourself and move on.

## **What Is Worth It: Sorting the Pros and Cons of Challenging Activities?**

Facing a challenge – a sleepover, a drama production, a school ball 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 understand whether it was worth it to them. Sometimes your child may decide that it is worth it to participate in activities to ward off feeling trapped by the OCD. Help your child see partial successes. What part of the experience was fun or went well? What can you learn from it? Should your child limit him/herself to one activity a weekend, say, to have the 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/failure.

## **Setting Limits Versus 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 emotional pain, but remember if you get pulled in too that won't help anyone. So if your child has a lengthy prayer ritual before a meal, for example, let them know that you are going to begin eating after one prayer so the food doesn't get cold, and encourage them to join in when they can. If everyone makes room for the OCD, it will be the houseguest who never leaves. It is 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/her” 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 as possible to your child, remember that kids should choose their own OCD challenges for the week. 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 or other interim solution. 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 to push it away, assert power. This will help your child learn how to not get stuck and how to stay clear of hopelessness.

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