



3. THE ACCOMMODATION TRAP

Introduction

This workshop should ideally be held between workshops 5 and 6 in the *student* component.

Specific workshop objectives

At the end of the workshop, the parents will be able to:

- Understand the concept of accommodation;
- Target accommodating behaviours that they use;
- Replace their accommodating behaviours with new solutions;
- Discuss the necessary changes with their child.

How the workshop works

1. Welcome the parents and present the workshop objectives and how it will work.

A. Discuss your experience (15 min.)

1. Lead a roundtable discussion about the parents' observations during the past few weeks. How are things going at home? Have they noticed any changes or had any issues with their child?
2. What have they observed about their own emotions? Were they able to identify an underlying need? How did they address this need? What strategies did they use to meet it, with kindness and compassion?

B. The accommodation trap (30 min.)

If you would like, use the following video to prepare or to explain the concept of accommodation while keeping the questions below to engage and interact with parents:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KBGjPVOj_0.

1. Now introduce the concept of accommodation. As you give the following explanations, remember to pause occasionally to let the parents react. Give them a chance to express

what they think or feel about the content and give examples.

2. Introduce the parents to the definition of accommodation: Accommodation consists in altering your parenting style to prevent or lessen the discomfort your child feels because of their anxiety (Thompson-Hollands *et al.*, 2014).

Tip for facilitators

Some parents use accommodation a lot, and have done so since their child was very young, often without being aware of it. Others are anxious themselves and project this onto their child. Regardless, it's important that they don't blame themselves too much or judge the other parents. Many parents feel terribly guilty once they realize that their accommodating behaviours may have had negative consequences on their child or perpetuated their anxiety. So, you're encouraged to normalize this phenomenon.

3. Point out that accommodation is normal, because one of their jobs as a parent is to care for their child, meet their needs, and protect them from harm. For that reason, most parents manipulate or adapt certain situations to help their child cope better. It's actually hard to avoid completely: When the counter's too high, we pull up a footstool so our child can cook with us.
4. However, point out that by being overly accommodating, they can actually make their child more anxious, since this is a form of avoidance. Remind them of the consequences of avoidance behaviours and the importance of helping their child to step outside of their comfort zone instead. Extensive research involving children with anxiety has shown that while these accommodating behaviours may lessen the child's discomfort in the short term, they actually maintain and even increase it in the long term (Ginsburg *et al.*, 2004). Accommodation can also send an implicit message to your child that they are incapable of doing things on their own or that they are right to be worried. So, it's important to be aware of the harmful effects of resorting to accommodation too often.
5. Even though accommodating behaviours maintain and worsen anxiety in the long run, explain to the parents that forcing the child into scary situations too soon, without guidance, and without respecting their boundaries, is equally harmful and can also make their anxiety worse. Remind them of the importance of baby steps.
6. Ask the parents to give examples of accommodating behaviours from their own lives. Finish with the following examples (inspired by Benito *et al.*, 2015; Lebowitz *et al.*, 2012):
 - Changing the family routine and making exceptions;
 - Providing too much security: phone calls, hovering, asking questions, etc.;
 - Enabling the child when it comes to avoiding anxiety-provoking situations (school, social situations);
 - Speaking or acting on the child's behalf;
 - Following strict rules and rituals;

- Limiting their responsibilities and independence.
7. Explain to them that easing up on their accommodating behaviours is likely to force them outside of their own comfort zone. These changes may even seem counterintuitive, because they cause the child to feel uncomfortable in the short term. Remind the parents that while they are responsible for protecting their child, they also have a role to play in developing their child's independence, and to do this, they will need to work on accommodation.
 8. Make them aware that these accommodating behaviours are usually a deep-seated part of the family dynamic. Their child may react to this change, momentarily becoming more anxious, angry, or sad. They will need to remember that they're doing this for their child's own good, and tell their child that they trust them and believe in them and their abilities. This may be harder on some days, but it's important to stick with it (inspired by Lebowitz *et al.*, 2011a; Lebowitz *et al.*, 2011b).
 9. Tell the parents that the first step will be having a conversation about this with their child. Let the parents know that their child will have already heard about accommodation in their workshop, along with the possible changes in how they will deal with their child's behaviour. It's important that this conversation take place when everyone is calm and receptive. If the child is anxious or the parent is feeling very emotional, it's best to postpone it. If possible, it's a good idea for both parents to discuss the issue and the necessary changes beforehand; they can then speak to the child together.
 10. Introduce the parents to some strategies to help them adopt behaviours that are more helpful for their child (Masia *et al.*, 1999). These strategies can be found in their *Handy parent guide*:
 - Listen carefully and be empathetic;
 - Remind the child that you trust them;
 - Encourage them to be independent and self-sufficient;
 - Model and encourage brave behaviours;
 - Do breathing or visualization exercises with the child;
 - Plan opportunities for exposure (baby steps);
 - Provide opportunities for exposure;
 - Be positive and supportive: celebrate all efforts;
 - Remind them about emotion management strategies;
 - Help them reformulate their thoughts using specific questions;
 - Pay attention to your own emotions, which can influence accommodating behaviours;
 - Seek help.

C. Accommodation at home (40 min.)

1. Now ask the parents to take a moment to reflect on their accommodating behaviours. Give them about 10 minutes to answer the following questions, which are in their *Handy parent guide*:
 - What do I remember about the concept of accommodation?



- Do I tend to use accommodating behaviours? If so, in which situations? If not, do I tend to push my child into scary situations too quickly?
 - Which new strategies could I use to help my child manage their anxiety better?
2. Once the exercise is over, reconvene as a group and talk about the parents' answers.
 3. Then, ask the parents to individually write down a few sentences of the conversation they plan to have with their child. They can use this script for inspiration:

"I know how hard it is for you to [fill in the blank]. I understand it scares you or makes you feel really anxious. I want you to know this is completely normal and that everyone gets scared sometimes. But I also want you to know that it's my job, as a parent, to help you do better at the things you find hard, which is exactly what I've decided to do. We'll be working on this for a while, and I know it'll probably take some time, but I love you too much not to help you. We'll talk about this again soon, and we'll come up with ideas to help you cope better. I'm really proud of you!" (Lebowitz *et al.*, 2014)
 4. Also ask the parents to identify strategies to use in situations where their child is anxious and they tend to accommodate them. Ask them to draw up a short personal action plan of the behaviours they could adopt to help their child achieve their goal. Remind them of the importance of baby steps.

For example, if their child wants to hang out with kids their age but tends to stick close to their parents at social events because they're shy, the parents can step away for a certain period of time; they could also avoid answering questions for the child, let the child answer the phone, suggest a fun activity they can invite friends to, etc.
 5. When the parents are finished, lead a group discussion on their action plans. Ask them to specifically describe some of the things they could do. Encourage the parents to share their ideas, which could help them to solidify their own action plans.

D. Conclusion and invitation (5 min.)

1. Encourage the parents to follow their action plan, once they've had a conversation with their child. Ask them to pay attention to any changes or problems they may notice, which they will discuss at the next workshop.

