

Lynn Lyons- Anxiety/School Avoidance

Speaker 3: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Peaceful Parenting Podcast. I'm your host, Sarah Rosensweet, mom of three young people, Peaceful Parenting Coach, and your cheerleader and guide on all things parenting. Each week, we'll cover the tools, strategies, and support you need to end the yelling and power struggles, and encourage your kids to listen and cooperate so that you can enjoy your family time.

Speaker 3: I'm happy to say we have a great relationship with our three kids. The teen years have been easy and joyful. Not because we're special unicorns, but because my kids were raised with peaceful parenting. I've also helped so many parents just like you stop struggling and enjoy their kids again. I'm excited to be here with you today and bring you the insight and information you need to make your parenting journey a little more peaceful.

Speaker 3: Let's dive into this week's conversation.

Speaker: Hey y'all, welcome back to another episode of the Peaceful Parenting Podcast. I'm so excited to have my friend Lynn Lyons back today for it's her fourth time being on the podcast. She's absolutely one of my favorite people to talk to and somebody [00:01:00] who I could not do my work without. Her work about anxiety has been so central to my work as a coach and my learning as a coach and as a parent,

Speaker: Lynn is a psychotherapist, author and speaker, and she's had a private practice for over 30 years. Helping anxious kids and they're usually anxious parents. And speaking of that, she's also the author of one of the books I recommend all the time.

Speaker: Anxious kids, anxious parents. We'll put a list of all these resources in the show notes for you.

Speaker: So today we are talking about when your child doesn't want to go to school avoidance. And even if your child is not avoiding school, but is anxious about anything else, this is going to be a great episode for you to listen to because no matter what the content is, what Lynn says, whether it's avoiding school or dogs or elevators or, Speaking to strangers, it's always the same, right?

Speaker: The tools are always the same. But we are focusing today specifically on school avoidance, how to know whether it's emotionally based school avoidance or something else. And [00:02:00] also what to do at different ages. We do at the end, talk about the moment of goodbye, which may be especially pertinent for a lot of you at this time of year, dropping off little kids.

Speaker: Who may be having some trouble separating from you. So have a listen. I love talking to Lynn. She is so good at explaining these concepts and really how to put them into practice. If you have anyone in your life is anxious, or if you're anxious, you're going to want to have a listen to this episode.

Speaker: As always, please rate and review us on Apple podcasts and. rate us on Spotify. The more we have those lovely five star reviews, the more we can reach other families who don't know about our podcast or about peaceful parenting. And of course, also check out Lynn's podcast. She does mention at the end, she has a wonderful podcast called Fluster Clucks.

Speaker: So if you know somebody who has a kid who's saying right now, I don't want to go to school or I'm not going, or if it's you, this is going to be a really helpful episode. Send this episode to a friend. It's [00:03:00] really. Lynn is one of those voices in the world of parenting who just makes so much sense.

Speaker: She's so easy to listen to. And honestly, her advice about anxiety is the best advice. And I often see pretty bad advice out there about anxiety. So definitely give this one a listen. Okay. That's ,me, Lynn.

Sarah: Hello, Lynn. Welcome back to the podcast.

Lynn: Oh, hi Sarah. Thanks for having me back.

Sarah: You are now in the lead with the most number of appearances on the until today you were tied with with Ned Johnson for three times each and now you've moved ahead with, this is your fourth time on the podcast. So

Sarah: back.

Lynn: All right. I'll send Ned an email and let him know that I surpassed him

Sarah: You two are two of my favorite people to talk to, so I'm sure he'll catch up to you again at some point.

Lynn: I enjoy talking to Ned very much as well. So

Sarah: Good. Maybe a three way call at some point would be fun.

Lynn: Yeah, that would be fun.

Sarah: you on, find a common topic.

Sarah: So today we're going to be talking about anxiety fueled school
[00:04:00] refusal or

Sarah: avoidance. And I just mentioned to you before we started recording that I wanted to talk separate that from, and as you mentioned, which I would want to ask you to repeat, that there, there can be some Venn diagram overlap with what I'm going to say is like neurodivergent sensory based burnout that can also be a cause of school avoidance or school refusal.

Sarah: But I think a lot of, a lot of people aren't aware of the difference between those. So maybe you could talk about that first of all, and then we'll just focus on the anxiety piece.

Lynn: Sure. And the term that is, we have to have a term for everything. And the term that's bantied about these days is we talk about emotionally based school refusal or emotionally based school avoidance. And people, and again, it doesn't really matter to me, but people are using the term avoidance now more than refusal because refusal has this, like they're refusing to do it.

Lynn: So emotionally based school avoidance. But whenever a child is not able
[00:05:00] to attend school, you have to rule out things before you determine that it's an emotionally based school avoidance because very often we discover that maybe there is a learning issue that hasn't been diagnosed, right? If you're a, if you're a little person and it's become clear to you as you become more aware that you're going to have to read aloud.

Lynn: and you know that you can't read very well because you have dyslexia and it hasn't been identified yet, of course you're not going to want to go to school. If you are a child who is being bullied or teased and has difficulty making social connections, of course you're not going to want to go to school.

Lynn: If you are a child who has sensory issues, so being in that environment overwhelms you. And we know, and I did a podcast on this differentiation between sensory and anxiety. We know that repeated exposure over and over again, [00:06:00] flooding a kid with sensory issues isn't really going to give

you the same impact or the same result as if we're talking about an anxiety disorder.

Lynn: So we want to be able to differentiate between those things because the approach can be different and often is different. Now that said, what we don't want to have happen is we don't want parents to come to the conclusion, without really thinking about this and investigating this, to come to the conclusion that avoidance is the best policy if you have a neurodivergent child or if you have a child who has dyslexia or autism or whatever.

Lynn: Anxiety often is secondary to those things, but we still want to address the anxiety because we want the kids to be able to step into their world and the thing we really want to pay attention to is the risk of isolation.

Sarah: right.

Lynn: So we want to have that balance between there's [00:07:00] a child that is just really, like you said, burnt out, right?

Lynn: We've got a kid who's just really worked really hard to manage and they're burnt out and they don't want to go to school for a day. I think that is a totally appropriate thing to do. And in fact, and I was interviewed for an article about this, probably for the networker, about mental health days, right?

Lynn: And how schools were. And I just thought, I don't, we don't even need to call them mental health days. When I was in high school and probably in middle school too, if I was worn out, if I was burnt out, if I had too much and I wanted to take a day off from school, my mom was like, yeah, take a day off from school.

Sarah: We called those home days when my kids were

Lynn: Oh, that's a great term for it. Home days. So I think sometimes that we use terminology and we're using this language in a way that puts it in a category, mental health day, when it really is that as human beings, our brains and our bodies [00:08:00] often just need a break. And that's a really wonderful thing to be able to talk to kids about.

Lynn: I'll just give you an example since I'm ranting about this. I saw something, it was probably after the Olympics and that somebody was getting hassled on social media. about something. I forget that. And the person said, the

athlete said that they had removed themselves from social media for mental health reasons.

Lynn: I think it's okay for us to say, you know what? People were really treating me horrible on social media, as the research is coming in loud and clear is really hard for a lot of people to manage and deciding not to go on social media is a good choice. And I just think we have to be careful with that

Lynn: Because I think it sets up kids to feel less capable than they are.

Sarah: And you being careful with labeling taking a break from school because you need a break or because social [00:09:00] media is not healthy for you as a mental health issue.

Lynn: Correct. Yeah. Yeah.

Sarah: It's just sensible rather than, it's sensible rather than a mental

Lynn: Yeah. And it's what we all need as human beings, regardless of whether we want to call it mental health or not, just like with your kids, just like when I was growing up, just like with my kids, sometimes we just need some time to regroup,

Sarah: Yeah.

Lynn: right? And we don't have to pathologize that.

Lynn: I really want to normalize that rather than feeling like you have to have some, diagnosis, or you have to have some terminology. True. It's really okay for you to just say you know what, I got to get off social media. This is driving me crazy. Or people aren't kind on social media and I choose to get away from this unkindness.

Lynn: So when we're talking about kids needing a break from school, right? That's a really healthy thing for a lot of kids. And some kids need more of a break than others. Where it becomes problematic is that if that's the go to strategy and then if we've got a kid who's using [00:10:00] avoidance as a way to manage anxiety because nobody's taught them how to manage their anxiety yet, then we're setting up some long term patterns that we know are just not going to be healthy over time.

Sarah: That makes sense. And to go back to your original examples, those examples of a kid who is undiagnosed as dyslexic or

Sarah: being bullied, there's some problem solving

Sarah: That you need, that need to happen. And of

Sarah: course being bullied could make you anxious, but

Sarah: the root cause of it isn't isn't like a overactive amygdala.

Sarah: The root cause of it is the kids who are being mean to that kid.

Sarah: So yes, that again, the Venn diagram, I don't know

Sarah: if I

Sarah: love Venn diagrams, but.

Lynn: love Venn diagrams too.

Sarah: Apparently Kamala Harris loves Venn diagrams as

Lynn: Oh good for her. Yeah. I love a good Venn diagram and there are, I don't know if the comedian, Dimitri Martin. , if you like Venn diagrams, you should check out his comedy because he's got the best of the best.

Sarah: All right. I'll have to check it out.

Lynn: Yeah. Yeah. I love a good Venn diagram.

Sarah: Yes. Someone that I met on vacation said, you really Venn diagrams, don't you? [00:11:00] And I had never noticed that this was last year. And then I came home from vacation and noticed that our entire, my entire family speaks in Venn. It's like the perfect Venn diagram of this and

Sarah: this Oh, okay.

Sarah: I do love them.

Lynn: Yeah. I, yeah, I love him too.

Sarah: So the, you look first that the reason why a child is avoiding school, are there any underlying issues? Yes. That you can

Sarah: support them with. So they say there aren't any, or you solve those issues. Where do we go next when it is that emotional, what did you, how did you phrase it

Lynn: Emotionally based school avoidance, right? Emotionally based school avoidance,

Sarah: does that, what does that look like? And maybe just give a little description of what that would look like

Lynn: So it. Yeah, and so that encompasses anxiety and depression. It's important for us to look at the combination of anxiety and depression, particularly as kids are moving into adolescence because it's more likely that you've got a child who's been anxious for a long time. It's more likely than not that we will start to see depression show up.

Lynn: So it's important that, and I just like lumping [00:12:00] them together, particularly as kids get older, because the patterns that keep it going are so similar, that keep these two things going. So what we want to look at is Anxiety and depression are what are referred to as internalizing disorders, which means the bulk of the work is done on the inside, which is a good differentiation to make, like we, giving the example of bullying, that's not an internal issue, that's an external issue.

Lynn: So internalizing disorder, it means it's oftentimes the way that you interpret things the way that you experience things. And I tell kids all the time that both anxiety and depression are very much disorders of storytelling, disorders of flawed narratives. And once that narrative gets some footing, once it gets some nice strong pathways in your brain, then you begin to [00:13:00] look for reasons on the outside.

Lynn: that support the narrative on the inside. So an example of that might be, I'm not going to go to school because people are mean to me. Okay. So we listened to that and we checked that out and we talked to the teacher and we'd say, gosh, that's, the teacher's that's not really going on here.

Lynn: And if that were the case, I definitely step in. But what happens is that story, that projection, that what if ing. about what is going to happen in the future shuts people down. Whether you're a little kid, a teenager, an adult, the

story, that anxiety part that I talk about, that cult leader becomes the dominant voice in determining whether or not a child goes to school.

Lynn: And when we put that voice in charge, it is very predictable. That isolation will [00:14:00] follow because the anxiety does not care at all whether or not your child goes to school, makes friends, tries out for the school play, joins the chess club, doesn't care at all. So we really want to pay attention to, is this, is the narrative about this, something bad might happen.

Lynn: Or I am experiencing something that's not an emergency, but my anxious brain, my worry is creating an emergency such that I perceive school as dangerous. If school really is dangerous, that's not an anxiety issue. But if you are perceiving something that's dangerous, that's not dangerous, that's when the avoidance starts to happen.

Lynn: The other big reason that we get a lot of [00:15:00] school avoidance is because of somatic symptoms. So again, that's something else we want to check out. If you've got a child who's complaining of headaches, who's complaining of stomach aches, if you've got a child who's having difficulty eating, right? You want to make sure that there's not something medically going on that, again, you need to problem solve.

Lynn: You need to pay attention to, but it is very common for kids that are having difficulty going to school to really focus. And for the family to really focus on the somatic issues and in particular tummy trouble. Yeah.

Sarah: that a little bit? Because I know what you, I know that anxiety can cause actual real stomach aches. However, a lot of parents think I've taken them to the doctor and there's no issue. And so they're quote faking it, or they just don't want to go to school. So can you talk a little bit about how anxiety can. Produce actual real headaches, tummy aches, those kinds of things.

Lynn: The anxiety is basically a [00:16:00] hijacking of a very powerful and primitive fight or flight or freeze system. And when this system is set off, when it's activated, when it's triggered, the body does some pretty amazing things to keep you alive, but it's not because you're in a life or death situation, but it still does the same things.

Lynn: What it does is it activates your adrenals to get you pumped up, so a stress response, muscles get tight and activated. It impacts your ability to think clearly because your prefrontal cortex zizzes out a little bit because the amygdala now is in charge, that primitive protective part.

Lynn: And the other thing that it does very commonly is that it shuts down your digestive system. So when people are anxious, this messaging system says, all right, we're going to shut down the digestive system and we're going to send the energy elsewhere. When [00:17:00] your digestive system gets shut down, that's when we feel nauseous.

Lynn: That's when we get tummy aches. When things, I say this oftentimes to kids, life is better when things are moving properly from hole to hole. And any disruption in things moving from hole to hole makes us feel bad. And anxiety is absolutely the queen or the king of disrupting that system. It is a very reactive system.

Lynn: So what often happens is kids are truly having physical symptoms. They are truly having tummy aches. They truly feel nauseous. They might be having diarrhea. They might even be vomiting. And so what happens is parents often take the child to the pediatrician or to the family physician. Maybe they get referred to a GI specialist.

Lynn: They do the whole workup and everything is functioning as it should, but there is still tummy pain. That's actually a [00:18:00] diagnosis called functional abdominal pain. And about 12 to 13 percent of kids in the whole population of kids are going to experience that at some time in their lives. The treatment for, and it's a little, the term is a little confusing because it says functional abdominal pain.

Lynn: And what that means is that everything is functional and you still have abdominal pain. But, and the treatment for that, the approach to that, is to live your life.

Lynn: And so once we determine that this stomach pain is because of stress, because of anxiety, because of worry, we don't want to then treat the stomach pain as if there is something wrong with the tummy.

Lynn: And it is very common. So kids are more likely to have tummy pain as a result of their worry, as a result of their anxiety. The younger [00:19:00] they are, and the more anxious their parents are. Those are two things that, that correlate with that. Parents need a lot of coaching, and a lot of support, and a lot of information to recognize that the best thing you can do, once we've determined that these physical symptoms are the result of, doesn't mean they're not real, the result of, that the more we get our child back involved in their life, the better the prognosis.

Lynn: The same with a lot of chronic pain syndromes that happen too. So when we've got this emotional based school avoidance, very often it is the result of a child waking up in the morning, of having some sort of physical symptom, very often tummy ache, and then the parent saying, okay either you're sick, I think you're sick, or I know you're not sick, but you've got this tummy ache, [00:20:00] and so how can I send you to school with a tummy ache?

Lynn: And all of this sort of snowballs to the point where an anxious child is having more and more tummy aches, and sometimes, not all the time, an anxious child learns, particularly if you've got a pretty anxious parent, that a physical symptom is my ticket out. And so they become more likely to be sick. And then we end up with a tiger by the tail.

Sarah: And so what starts that process? You mentioned the thought that people at school are mean to me

Sarah: or are going to be mean to me or the fear. And then you also talked about the physical symptoms. Would that be the physical symptom would be the second thing that came along after the anxious thought, or, I dunno.

Sarah: Just walk

Lynn: Yeah, and a lot of times what it is that makes a child worried about going to school? Once we've ruled out the things that really are a problem that we can pay attention to or that we need to resolve. [00:21:00] What they worry about really doesn't matter to me all that much.

Lynn: And some kids will really just talk about tummy aches without even being able to articulate, I'm worried about this or I'm afraid of this.

Lynn: Once we start getting into the specifics, once we've determined that this is an anxiety issue, once we start getting into the specifics, once we start getting caught up in the content, once we start playing whack a mole to try and figure out how can we make school the perfect environment so it doesn't trigger my child's worry, we're going down the wrong path.

Lynn: In general, this is what often happens. Somebody will say my child says she's really worried or really scared to go to school. And she gets really upset in the morning. She's refusing to go. And we've asked her, what is it? She has the nicest teacher and we know she's not being bullied. And we've had her tested.

Lynn: She doesn't have any learning or academic issues. We took her to the doctor. Her tummy is fine. And we can't figure out [00:22:00] what it is about school that's making her anxious and we have to get to the root of it. And I will say, okay, worry wants certainty and comfort. That's its game. It wants to know everything.

Lynn: It doesn't like unpredictability. School is full of uncertainty. School is full of people of all ages, saying things, doing things. Kids are unpredictable. The bus driver could be unpredictable. You don't know what's going to be for lunch. That could be unpredictable. The goal is not to make an environment that is full of certainty and comfort and predictability.

Lynn: Good luck with that. It sounds good, but if you could pull that off, good luck. If you've ever been in an elementary school or a middle school or a high school, good luck with that. The goal is to start talking to the parents and for the parents to start talking to their children about [00:23:00] tolerating and managing, not knowing.

Lynn: The first instinct of parents is to try and solve all the problems. And usually they go about doing it. No, no blame, no shame. It's just, this is what the instinctive response is. Usually they go about doing it by trying to eliminate or remove or adjust so that things are certain and comfortable. And all of that feeds into this avoidance begets avoidance.

Lynn: A child may be able to articulate, I'm worried about school because kids are mean, or I'm worried about school because, and they might say, what if the fire alarm goes off, or I'm worried about school. I had this one little kid who was really worried about tuna fish, truly. That's, he didn't want to go to school because he was afraid of tuna fish.

Lynn: It made him, he got grossed out by tuna fish. it is that makes you [00:24:00] nervous or worried about going to school? is not the problem. The problem is when Worry shows up and announces to a family, this child cannot handle going to school, that there is something uncertain. There is something uncomfortable.

Lynn: Sometimes it's perceived of there is something dangerous and the Worry says, this kid can't handle it. We're not doing it. The amygdala, that little alarm system, that little smoke detector, listens to what it's told

Lynn: And it doesn't matter if it's real or not, doesn't differentiate. And so when a child starts fearing going to school, they discover very quickly that avoidance feels better.

Lynn: The family gets into a pattern of avoidance. A week turns into a month turns into seven months [00:25:00] and what they haven't been able to do. is to be able to address the power of the worry. Instead, they're trying to rearrange the environment out here. How do we make it comfortable? How do we make it okay? How do we make it predictable?

Lynn: And they haven't addressed the power of this internal part of you that we all have, this internal part of you, that's making school feel dangerous, overwhelming, too much, et cetera.

Lynn: And that's what we want to address.

Sarah: Okay. Yeah, you did a great job of explaining how that works. So what are the, obviously we're not going to distill your life's work in to the next 20 minutes, but

Sarah: where are some places to start? If a parents found themselves, like I'm particularly thinking of this family that I work with

Sarah: and they have a boy who's 11 turning

Sarah: 12. And I think he missed 45 or 50 days

Sarah: of school last year. And. I was thinking about little kids, you can pick them up and bring

Sarah: them and leave them

Sarah: with some re, reassurances and then [00:26:00] you pick them up and move them there. But

Sarah: as kids get bigger, you can't really force them to go to school.

Lynn: You can't, right? I know. And what you're describing with little kids, that's what we refer to technically as the sack of potatoes technique, right? You can pick them up, you can carry them. And that is a perfect if parents are

listening and they've got a four year old or a six year old or whatever, and they can get them physically into the school, that's a fine thing to do.

Sarah: And I always like to say with some support you, you've got a teacher and ECE there who's gonna, help support the child once you

Sarah: walk away kind of thing. Just want to add

Lynn: With, I always say, we're going to do this. with love and support and encouragement, right? Love, support, encouragement. So say you've got this fifth grader, probably This kid wasn't able to handle everything. This kid didn't have any worry. And then all of a sudden fifth grade started and they wouldn't go to school.

Lynn: So we've probably seen other ways in which the worry has shown up. Maybe not in big ways, like refusing to go to school, but [00:27:00] maybe this is a kid who is always been hesitant to step into new situations. Maybe this is a family that really has developed a pattern of making sure that they provide as much information as possible.

Lynn: Because their child worries about things. And so we really have to stay ahead of it with information. There's usually a pretty long pattern of that. Okay. But so say they come into my office or they come into your office, 11 years old, missing a ton of school. What do we do? I'm going to meet with the parents.

Lynn: And just so everybody hears me say this again, because clearly I can't say it enough, it is not a good idea to meet with kids alone. and not give the parents the information and the support and the steps that they need to solve any problem, particularly this problem. Meeting with a child alone, a fifth grader, without coaching the parents makes no sense to [00:28:00] me.

Lynn: It happens all the time.

Sarah: I quote you all the time that until someone can drive themselves to your appointments, if you had the choice of meeting with only the child or only the parents, you'd always choose the parents.

Lynn: correct. 99 percent of the time. Yep, for sure. So the first thing we want to talk about, the first thing that I want a parent to think about is how do you decide whether or not your child is going to school? How does that child decide whether or not they're going to school? And very often if they think about that, it's in the morning.

Lynn: And it's based on how they feel when they wake up. So many parents will say, okay, so we had a plan in place and it was Sunday night and we said, you know what? Tomorrow morning we're going to get up on time and we're going to have toast for breakfast and we're going to lay the clothes out and we're going to be all ready.

Lynn: And that's our plan to get to school. And then they wake up in the [00:29:00] morning and the child says, I don't feel good. I have a stomach ache. I'm sick. I'm not going. You can't make me go. It doesn't matter what time they got up, doesn't matter what they had for breakfast, doesn't matter whether or not the outfit was laid out.

Lynn: Because the way they're making the decision is based on how the worry is making a child feel and think. So they're basically waking up on Monday morning and saying, worry, what do you think? Should he go to school? And worry's is it going to be certain all day? Is he going to be comfortable all day?

Lynn: And you're like I'm not sure. And worry says, okay, then we're out. You haven't met my criteria. Yeah. The goal is to really recognize how worry works. And one of the things we are getting wrong when we are dealing with anxious kids is that we're focusing on all these little techniques that we're going to do without really addressing how worry works [00:30:00] and having a response to it.

Lynn: Because the techniques either explicitly or implicitly are designed and we hope that they're going to get rid of the worry. So I'm going to give you a stress ball. I'm going to have you hold ice cubes. I'm going to have you do this. I'm going to distract you with this. Those things may help, but what we really want to focus on is, let's pull the worry out.

Lynn: Let's give it a name like I always do, right? So we name it Stella. And Stella has certain demands. If we put Stella in charge, this kid's not getting to school. So we know Stella's going to show up. Sunday night. Stella may be like, yeah, okay. I'll be a little bit quiet, but I'm just biding my time.

Sarah: It's not till tomorrow. Don't.

Lynn: It's not till tomorrow. So morning comes. And Stella shows up and says, you can't handle this. [00:31:00] Stella, the worry, which lives in our prefrontal cortex, fires off that amygdala. The body has physical responses, right? Big emotional responses. If you are not talking about a plan that includes a response to Stella, then none of those other things that you're doing are going to work.

Lynn: They can help. So even say you come up with a plan that I'm going to drive you to school and the counselor is going to meet you at the door and take you into the classroom, right? Fine. But Stella is not going to be quiet. So unless you are talking about how worry shows up, what it says, and what the response is to it.

Lynn: Nothing else is going to work. When you are responding to Stella, here's the key. We're not going to tell Stella to go away. We're not going to tell Stella to disappear. We're not going to say, Stella, you have to go away so I can go to school. [00:32:00] Cause Stella's not going to go away. We have to coexist with Stella for a while.

Lynn: So we have to say to Stella, I knew you were going to show up. I knew you were going to chirp in my ear. I knew you were going to say what you always say, which is some version of you can't handle it. I knew you were going to fire up my amygdala. I knew you were going to shut down my digestive system.

Lynn: Cause that's what Stella does. And even though Stella is there. We're still going to get to school. And why are we going to do that? Because the brain learns experientially. And the only way that this kid can begin to believe that he's capable of managing school is if he goes to school, even though Stella is still chirping in his ear, he goes to school and he has some successes.

Lynn: Success does not mean being comfortable in the classroom. being calm, being relaxed, [00:33:00] being able to handle everything. Success means being able to step into a situation and being able to manage not knowing and being able to manage our feelings. The rule of thumb with school avoidance is we want them in the building for as long as possible, as quickly as possible.

Lynn: Once we get them in the door, do not make a plan to pick them up. If he feels anxious, don't. Okay. If the counselors have to help and he's going in and out of the classroom and that's okay at the beginning. We want him in the building and we want parents to understand they're doing the right thing by getting them there and leaving them there.

Lynn: Long term school avoidance is a very clear predictor of developing problems as they move through teenagerhood, [00:34:00] even into young adulthood. So we have to take it seriously. We can't mess around with it. And if a parent feels as if they're constantly in negotiation with Stella together, I want the parents and the child on the same page.

Lynn: I want Stella to be there. Oh, hi, Stella. Nice to see you. You're not in charge of this family. And oftentimes parents just need some language. They need permission. They need to know that they are not emotionally damaging their child by getting them into school. If kids and parents together have an understanding of how this thing works, so that when it shows up nobody's Oh my gosh.

Lynn: And they say, yep, this is what we knew what would happen and this is how we get through it. That I want kids to keep success journals. I don't, I, a success for me is not that a kid felt calm all day. [00:35:00] A success for me is that Stella showed up. And you hung in there and you managed Stella. And it is that experiential practice over and over again that gets us there.

Lynn: Now, to your first question, you've got a fifth grader and he's, a preteen. And he says, I'm not going, I'm not going. You have to start with him and his parents understanding how this thing works.

Lynn: Because. If all he knows is that when he goes into school, he feels like he's going to throw up. He feels like he is going to panic.

Lynn: He feels terrified. He doesn't know what to say. If that's all he knows, then just throwing him into school without any of that, what I call front loading is just plain mean,

Sarah: Yeah, it will cause like panic

Lynn: yeah.

Sarah: yeah. Yeah

Lynn: yeah. If you had a little kid that was terrified of dogs, we wouldn't say, all right, we're gonna lock you in the bathroom with seven dogs and have you get over it, right?

Lynn: That [00:36:00] would be terrible.

Lynn: We have to address how worry works. Doesn't matter, truly, the content doesn't matter if it's school or dogs or spiders or vomit or people or deaf. I don't care. We have to have parents and kids understand how this thing shows up, what it does. We have to normalize big reactions because one of the things that very often happens is that the louder or more scary or dramatic or physical a child gets, people will say it's got to be more than anxiety.

Lynn: Or we tried that Lynn, but she got so upset. So now we have to try something else. And you're just playing whack a mole. It's about consistency with love and support and encouragement.

Sarah: No, what I see a lot. And I always tell people I couldn't do my work without you and your work, but what I see a lot is it's easier, easy slash easier when everyone involved can say, yeah, I'm feeling worried or I'm [00:37:00] feeling anxious.

Sarah: It's easier to do this kind of work with

Sarah: them. But with this particular family that I was just talking about, I don't think this child would identify that he feels worried or he

Sarah: feels anxious.

Sarah: He examples why he won't go is because. there's a baseball game for his team after school on Friday and he's convinced that none of his friends are going to school because they have this game after school. So he's not going.

Sarah: And I do think it is anxiety,

Sarah: but or his hair doesn't look right.

Sarah: So he's not going.

Sarah: So he wouldn't say I guess my short way of asking is how do you help

Lynn: don't call it worry, right? So you want to look at the pattern. So for him, just as what you're describing, I would say, so if I were talking to this kid, let's just say his name is Joe, I would say, okay, so Joe, you've got a part of you that's a very rigid storyteller and this part of you comes up with these stories.

Lynn: And it's very good at convincing you that you can't handle things, or [00:38:00] it's very good at convincing you whatever it might be. It's very good at convincing you, right? So the story is going to be there. So we find a way, we find a way of using language that he can't dispute.

Lynn: He can say I'm not worried.

Lynn: I'm not anxious. I just don't want to go to school. Blah, blah, blah. Okay. So there's the, there's a storyteller again. There's the rigid storyteller.

Sarah: That's So.

Sarah: helpful. So because, anxiety likes control, this is just another aspect of how anxiety shows up in that control and that rigidity.

Sarah: Yeah.

Lynn: Remember that anxiety is a disorder of storytelling. And so think of social anxiety. What does social anxiety, what's the story that it tells? People are judging you.

Lynn: Guess what? They are all the time. We're very judgy. So it says, people are judging you and you can't handle it.

Lynn: So we want to change the story to, people are judging you. Sometimes it doesn't feel good. People are judging you. You're also judging [00:39:00] people. Okay. That's how it works. How do we tolerate, here comes that uncertainty again, how do we tolerate not knowing exactly what people are thinking? That's hard, right?

Lynn: You got to be a human being in the world and you don't know exactly what people are thinking. So we always want to look and see where's the storytelling, what

Sarah: Right.

Lynn: it's telling the story about, again, not all that important to me. The commonality is. Here comes a spider and you can't handle it or, I was with my nephew.

Lynn: He just turned 13 and he doesn't go outside very much. So we were in a kayak and a daddy longlegs came out of the kayak and he was like, Oh my God. And he said, that's the biggest spider I've ever seen. And I said, you've never seen a daddy longlegs? And he said, Oh, that's a spider. That's a spider. I go, okay.

Lynn: So right now your worried brain is freaking [00:40:00] out and telling you a story, right? So I'm not going to abide by that story. I'm going to pick up the daddy long legs and move it. So it was very clear. His imagination was

creating a story about a daddy long legs. This boy that you're working with, that the family is stuck trying to figure out, he's got a very good imagination.

Lynn: And he comes up with stories. And what you might say to him is interesting. This part of you is really good at coming up with these rigid, catastrophic stories, and the result is always the same of these stories. The result is always, so I'm out.

Lynn: So you're very good. This part of you is very good at coming up with the stories that always lead to the same result.

Lynn: I'm out. That's what worry does. That's what anxiety does.

Sarah: And

Sarah: then your, to link back to what you were saying about depression a little by little, your life gets smaller and smaller, right? And worry [00:41:00] keeps you from doing all of the things. And I think that's a great way in with kids too, is how far down the road are we going to go with this?

Lynn: And that's what the reason we see it show up so much, an anxious little kid becomes an anxious little tween becomes an anxious teenager. And then here comes the depression because adolescents are hardwired to connect,

Lynn: Right? There was all sorts of stuff happening in their bodies in, on every level, right?

Lynn: During adolescence, all this change that's happening. And It's all geared toward connection.

Lynn: And so they begin to become more and more aware of the fact that they're not connected. Now they may say to you, Oh, I don't care. Doesn't matter to me. It does. And they do. And being anxious and trying to create certainty and trying to avoid what your brain is perceiving as life threatening affronts all the time is [00:42:00] exhausting

Lynn: And they get tired out and they get to that place of hopelessness.

Lynn: They're on social media, they're watching what everybody else is doing, they're watching all of these curated stories of perfect this and perfect that and they can't help but feel. Left out because they are and anxiety doesn't care and feeling left out feeling as if you're Missing connection feeling as if you want

something, but you don't feel like it's possible for you to have that Boy, here comes the depression right here comes the why bother so that's really why we want to think preventatively if we know that Anxiety and the avoidance of anxiety is such a pathway into this depression.

Lynn: We really want to make sure that we're getting on top of it early. And like you say, it's just, it's easier when they're littler, cause you can, you have, as a parent, you have more say [00:43:00] and when we let it go and let it go and let it go, then we tend to, have more problems. I always say it's like the strep throat of emotional disorders, right?

Lynn: If you treat it earlier, it's easier. And if you wait, it becomes more complicated. I get these emails from parents and I am genuinely empathic to their situation and also genuinely frustrated because they'll say I've got an anxious child. She's been anxious since she was five.

Lynn: She's going away to college next month.

Lynn: Can you see her because now she doesn't want to go,

Sarah: Right.

Lynn: right? I'm like, of course she doesn't want to go.

Sarah: It's So, hard because as parents we pride ourselves on being, like, in tune with our children's feelings and listening to them and being empathetic. And this really requires, I went through this with my daughter when she was 11 and suddenly she'd heard some scary stories at school at, And I know I, for a couple months, I just went, okay, I'll sleep with you, or you can sleep with me.

Sarah: And then it [00:44:00] required me to be like pretty tough. And, of course I. Yeah, have your work. So I armed her with all the front loading and all the tools, but still the path of loving least resistance was like, okay, you can sleep with me. But that I knew that wouldn't serve her. And it's been so great.

Sarah: She's 17 now and we still, it was something that was You know, come and gone with about six or seven months, a period of using your tools. And now still though, if she ever feels anxious about anything, I'm like, what are you going to say to your worry brain? When she's got those tools, she shared them with some of her friends who have some, when they're feeling anxious about things. So it really is when you do use your tools, it really does set kids up for a

lifetime of being able to do it because anxiety is always going to pop up here and

Lynn: That's right. And if we remember that the content doesn't matter, Yeah. So when your daughter was younger, it was, I heard some scary things at school. When she's older, then it's going to be different content, but the same approaches apply.

Sarah: Yeah. And she's got the tools.

Lynn: [00:45:00] she's got the

Sarah: Yeah.

Sarah: But to my point, like I had to be tough,

Sarah: like

Lynn: you did.

Sarah: I had to be tough and that was hard for me

Sarah: because I'm like a super like compassionate, empathetic parent.

Lynn: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that, I love, you love Venn diagrams. I love Venn diagrams. I also love analogies. I love metaphors. And so when parents say to me I just feel so for her and she's struggling so and I don't want her to go into school unless she's, and I, unless I know she's going to feel comfortable and calm and nothing bad is going to happen.

Lynn: I just, I want her to be relaxed when she goes into school. And I say, okay. So if that's your criteria, I get it because it's hard to watch our kids suffer. But if that's your criteria, she's not going in. And I often say, so if I said to you, okay, I totally get it. So here's what we're going to set up. When she goes into school, she's going to stop at the nurse's office and get a bong hit.

Lynn: [00:46:00] And that will guarantee she'll be chill. And then parents are like no. I wouldn't do that. We, it is so hard as a parent. To watch our children grow and suffer and be rejected and have their feelings hurt and freak out, it's so hard. But the more that we step in to eliminate any discomfort, the more that we step in to make sure that everything goes as planned.

Lynn: The more that we are crippling them for the future. I say this all the time. My grandmother used to say this, what's easy now is hard later. What's hard now is easy later. And then the, yeah. And the other thing that people say to me all the time is they go easier said than done. I go, yeah, no kidding.

Lynn: Everything I could say to you right now, Hey, Sarah, I'm going to run the Boston Marathon in April. I just said it, doing it is going to be a whole different, and I'm not going to do it, doing it as a whole different thing. So it's, it takes a lot [00:47:00] of, that's why I work with parents as you do, because they need support, they need encouragement.

Lynn: They need to hear from you and from me that this is ultimately what you're doing to give your kids the skills to be able to move forward in life. And if you really focus on relationships, you really focus on how anxiety and depression get in the way of connection, that's a really important message for kids to hear, for teens to hear, and for parents to hear as well.

Lynn: Because isolation and loneliness are rampant. and they're horrible.

Lynn: We want to get in there to make sure that we're giving our kids the skills to connect and anxiety and depression are the opposite. They're very disconnecting disorders. Yeah.

Sarah: that you've talked [00:48:00] about. I've heard you talk about before for the people who have those little kids, this podcast is coming out in September. There's going to be the school drop off. I've heard you talk about the moment of goodbye.

Sarah: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Lynn: So I talk about the moment of goodbye and I usually make a little box with my fingers, right? Cause I'm talking about containment. That if we can talk to kids about how the moment of goodbye has big feelings. And we say goodbye and parents, as you're talking to these parents, particularly if they're dropping their little one off for kindergarten, they're going to have a moment of goodbye.

Lynn: It is okay for your child to be upset. It is okay for them to cry. It's okay for them to express, mommy everywhere, daddy, If you can talk to kids about the moment of goodbye, and if you can normalize that, to say, yeah, we're going to get in the car, we're going to drive to school, or I'm going to bring you to the end of the driveway, and put you on the school bus, and there's going to be a

moment of goodbye, and you're going to have [00:49:00] big feelings, and I'm going to get through it, and you're going to get through it.

Lynn: I tell the story of the little girl that I worked with, and saying goodbye to her mommy to go to a dance with daddy, had a lot of separation anxiety with mommy, and she was talking to him, and she's this is the moment of goodbye, mommy! This is it, this is what we were talking about. And the mom's I know I can handle this.

Lynn: This is a moment of goodbye. And she's crying and she's just expressing these big emotions. If we can help kids give name, a name to it. And if we know if we call it a moment of goodbye, right? We're not calling it an hour of goodbye. We're not calling it a decade of goodbye. The moment of goodbye. All of the parents that are listening that just dropped a kindergartner off At their first day of kindergarten or drop their college kid off at college, right?

Lynn: There is a moment of goodbye. I know it. You know it. And if we can just normalize it for our kids as a part of a wonderful [00:50:00] moment of this is, I'm growing, I'm leaving, I'm separating, I'm feeling these things. Then it doesn't feel so big and overwhelming and it doesn't feel so pathologized because we've got to stop doing that with these normal big emotions that kids have.

Sarah: And your favorite phrase, of course,

Sarah: it's hard to say goodbye.

Lynn: Of course.

Sarah: I love that. Okay. And final question, which is a question I ask all my guests, which is if you could go back to your younger parent self,

Sarah: what advice would you give yourself?

Lynn: Oh, my younger parent self. Probably. So my boys are 24 and 26 right now. They just both had birthdays. That they will find their way. They will find their way and that the best thing that I can do for them is to give them the love and the support. And one thing I did do well. [00:51:00] So I'll go back and say to my younger parent self, good job is to not talk so much.

Lynn: Not talk so much. Listen, don't step in too quickly. They will find their way. They are still finding their way. My two guys, they're still finding, they haven't figured it all out yet,

Sarah: 20s are for.

Lynn: I know.

Sarah: That's what you'd find, let, they will find their way is good advice for any age, whether it's your toddler trying to

Sarah: put their jacket on or your

Sarah: teenager, struggling in high school or whatever. It's good advice for any age.

Lynn: It is good advice and it is so hard not to step in and do it because you know how to do it.

Sarah: I, I used to always say if everyone in my family would just let me run their lives, they'd be so much happier.

Lynn: know. I know it'd be so true if you would just listen to me. And that's the hard part of parenting is cause we've already done it. So we do know that if you put your project off to the last minute, you're going to really freak out. We do know that if we know it and that's not how the brain learns.

Sarah: No, my my [00:52:00] oldest son went from when he was blue, like in high school or me saying like, why don't you get some exercise to like practically shouting at me, mom, going for a run, doesn't solve everything to about five years later saying, I'm really managing my overwhelm by just stopping what I'm doing and going to the gym when I'm feeling overwhelmed.

Sarah: And I was just like, Oh my God.

Lynn: You're like, Oh my God, really? Wow. Good for you, buddy. I know. And haven't we all done that so many times, right? So we're the seed planters. We're the seed planters.

Sarah: Thank you so much. Where's the best place to go for folks to go and find out about what you do? And of course mentioned Fluster Clucks.

Lynn: Yeah. So Fluster Clucks, the podcast comes out every Friday. We've got episodes on virtually every day. everything because we've been doing it since April of 2020 now. And so you can go to flusterclucks. com or you can just go

to Spotify or Apple or all that jazz. And then my website is [00:53:00]
lynnlions.

Lynn: com and that talks about the trainings I'm doing and has my books and other videos and anything you want to know.

Sarah: Great. Thank you so much, Lynn.

Lynn: You are so welcome. It's a pleasure.

Speaker 2: Thanks for listening to this week's episode. I hope you found this conversation insightful and exactly what you needed in this moment. Be sure to subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast platform and leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts. Remember that I'm rooting for you. I see you out there showing up for your kids and doing the best you can.

Speaker 2: Sending hugs over the airwaves today. Hang in there. You've got this.