The Quitting Point

The urge to panic arrives long before you're actually in trouble.

I'm lying face down in the ocean just off the beach in Moalboal, near Cebu, Philippines. My snorkel supplies my lungs with air, my eyes are closed, and I'm staring down into the perfect 100m deep blue water, following the rope that disappears into the depths.

Freediving is a profoundly mental sport - and it's full of paradoxes. If I try to be the hero, I get a racing mind and tense muscles, which burn oxygen faster. This means a shorter dive and an earlier scramble for the surface. The divers who go deepest are the ones who stay calm, take their time, and soak it in while every instinct is shouting at them to swim to the surface. Learning to hold your breath is mostly learning to recognise false alarms.

Our kids have the same alarm I have for freediving, but for different reasons. "I can't do this" almost always arrives before they've actually reached their limit. School camp; the maths homework or language studies; the swimming carnival. For little ones, perhaps it's the first day at a new school or kinder, or the party where they won't know anyone.

And here's the crazy part. ***We*** have a similar alarm ***about them!*** Our instinct is to rescue them the moment they look like they could be in trouble (and are metaphorically scrambling for the surface). However when we step in and save them, they never find out how much they have left.

Researchers at Yale University tested this with 124 anxious children, randomly divided into two groups. One group of children received standard Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) from a qualified psychologist. In the other group, the children got nothing. Instead the researchers worked with *the parents* of the anxious children, teaching them how to stop "accommodating" the anxiety while staying warm and confident. And the outcome? Working with the parents worked just as well as treating the children with CBT.

Here's how to stop accommodating your kids in their anxious moments, and instead, to metaphorically help your kids dive deeper - by staying warm and kind rather than dispensing a "toughen-up princess" moment.

1 Do the breathe-up first

When freediving, you don't submerge yourself if you're stressed and aroused. Instead, you float and breathe until you're settled. Before your child does the hard thing, give them calm. Perhaps it's a consistent routine, some predictability, and a parent who isn't rushing them out the door.

2 Name the false alarm

Our children do best when we communicate clearly. Say it out loud. "That feeling about 'X' means your brain and body think you're in trouble. But that feeling always arrives early. Let's see if you can stay with it a bit longer."

3 Add a metre at a time

Freedivers don't jump from 10 metres to 30. They add a little, get comfortable, and add a little more. Don’t push your child into something that terrifies them. Take it inch by inch.

4 Turn before the limit

Good divers surface with something still in the tank. Ideally, your child will do their hard thing and still feel like they’ve got more capacity. It inspires another shot tomorrow. A child pushed to breaking doesn't usually want to try again in a hurry - or ever.

5 Be the buddy, not the diver

Nobody freedives alone. I had a buddy watch from the surface. He doesn’t dive for me. But he’s there. And the riskiest moment in a dive isn't the depth. Surprisingly, it's the ascent. Our kids need us to be there, particularly *after* the hard thing, so they can mentally decompress.

At 20 metres, my lungs have lost one third of their volume. The air has compressed and I have three times the pressure on my body as I have on the surface. But as I ascend, everything expands. I’ve reached the depth and I’m coming back to where I can breathe again. Breaking the surface and seeing the grin on my buddy’s face is a thrill.

It’s similar for our kids. What we want for them is *not* a childhood without discomfort or pressure. We want them to learn the skills they need so that they can stay calm inside when the pressure is on and they feel like they’re out of their depth - and for them to know that someone is always waiting on the surface.



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