

Stop Projecting, Start Parenting

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SUMMARY

In this episode of "Parenting and You," Dr. Shafali discusses the concept of projection in parenting, where parents unintentionally impose their past experiences and emotions onto their children's feelings. Through the stories of two mothers, Nicole and Monica, the episode highlights the importance of allowing children to express their emotions without parental overreaction or control, fostering a safe space for their feelings.

- *Projection occurs when parents interpret their children's emotions through their own past experiences, leading to misunderstandings.*
- *Nicole struggles with her daughter's anxiety, feeling overwhelmed and guilty, while Dr. Shafali encourages her to recognize her daughter's unique experiences.*
- *It's crucial for parents to hold space for their children's feelings without rushing to fix or manage them.*
- *Monica and Abel's daughters experience bedtime fears linked to past trauma, and the couple learns to support their children while encouraging independence.*
- *Children need reassurance and the opportunity to express their fears to process emotions effectively.*
- *Parents should avoid creating a protective bubble around their children, as it can lead to increased anxiety and fragility.*
- *Building a supportive environment allows children to develop resilience and manage their emotions independently.*
- *Dr. Shafali invites listeners to join her conscious community for further support and resources in parenting.*

[music] Hey everyone, welcome to a new episode of Parenting and You with me, Dr. Shafali. Have you ever been with your children when they're having a big emotion and instead of you connecting with them or giving them comfort, you actually find yourself getting overwhelmed or overreacting or trying to fix and manage and over control what they are feeling? Well, if this has happened to you, you're not alone. I cannot even tell you how many times when my daughter had a tantrum or was suffering anxiety. Instead of connecting with her, what I would do was project all my past experiences onto her experience. If you have ever done this, it is called projection. And you're not alone. That's what we're going to get into in this episode. how we as parents project onto our children and what we can do instead. Coming up next, a mother who's struggling with her 8-year-old daughter's anxieties and big emotions.

Joining me now is Nicole. She's a single mom to an 8-year-old daughter who suffers from anxiety. Nicole wants to know if she's overgiving or not doing enough as a parent. Hi, Nicole. It seems like you're struggling. So share with us a little bit about what you're going through. >> Yes, thank you so much. So a little history of where we've come from. When my daughter was three, I was working in a hospital during CO as a nurse. My taking care of my mom who was on hospice on my days off and then the day my mom died, I realized my husband was cheating on me.

>> So I went through a lot of fractured grief at that time. and then made a commitment to my daughter that, okay, I'm going to get through this to show her that I can hold her. I can hold me. I'm going to be a healthy mama. Fast forward, she's eight. I've had single custody since then. We have a happy home. We are very close. She sleeps in my bed with me. I work seven days a week from home, so I can make ends meet. I drive her to school, half hour there, half hour back, morning and afternoon.

So, we're kind of very connected. But this summer, she started having big meltdowns and I thought, "Oh, no." And thank goodness I found your books that just started this process of awareness. And then a month or two ago, she started having stomach aches and big fears and what seems like attachment issues. So, she's having trouble at school drop off again. I can't leave the room without her immediately calling after me. She won't do drop off playdates like her friends will do. She wants mom there.

So, I'm there. She'll do a play date, but I'm at someone else's house working on my laptop, things like that. So, I kind of feel like we're at a different place where she needs a lot of holding, yet I wonder if this is a transition of like how to help her hold herself as well. And I'm feeling a little lost with where my exertion should be, I guess.

>> So, she's 7 years old. You said >> just turned eight.

>> Just turned eight. So, when she goes through these moments, do you feel kind of pulled to give in to her and, you know, be there or you're wondering if you should create a boundary and tell her you're going to be fine. Mom will be back. I need to go work. Is that your struggle? I absolutely feel like being there for her because this is new and those really intense fears even at night or these meltdowns with even setting this up. Getting to this point today was such an ordeal of getting her to separate from me for about an hour to not be in the home with me was really really hard for her, which of course I couldn't give in, but it was just kind of like, wow, this is really big. I'm not certain how I'm supposed to help from here, I guess.

>> Correct. Correct. So, when she goes through this, does it bring up any memories for you from your childhood about separation or abandonment? Does that bring up any memories? >> Yes. It's surprising me because I didn't have the opportunity to have separation anxiety, but I was very anxious. Started stomach aches as well, but I was sexually abused as a child much younger. And I thought that's where that all came from. >> And I thought if my child didn't go through that and I protected her, she would be happy. And she's going through this showing similar things at the same ages. And so I think I'm a little bit like I didn't stop this.

>> Yes, you did. Yes, you did. I mean, you did stop the abuse and the trauma. So, don't feel like those are the same things. Children can go through the same symptoms, but for different reasons and you're conflating the two things. So, I would really encourage you to be more compassionate with yourself and not so hard on yourself. I think part of the issue is you're trying so hard to be the best mom and give your daughter the most happy life that very normal things like what she's going through is a phase.

You're taking it like it's some catastrophic thing that you did badly or that she is, you know, feeling things like you felt but you were abused. So, you're projecting your depth of your anxiety onto her and you need to watch that. And if you understood that she's actually okay, she's actually healthy, she's actually in a much better well

adjusted position than you ever were at that age, then you'll be empowered to tell her things like, "I know you're sad, but mommy will be back." I think by seven or eight, children can handle the transition, and they could cry, but you need to be confident that they're going to be okay, even if they're not confident that they can be okay. You see, our children need us to project that confidence, that trust, that stability that no matter what, you will be okay even if I'm not okay and even if you know I'm not here or even if life is not okay. You need to project to her that mommy can be sick sometimes, mommy can be sad sometimes, or life can be sad, but that doesn't mean that she can't be okay. So if you keep thinking that you need to be super happy in order for her to be happy or you need to create the perfect life in order for her to be happy, this is actually going to debilitate her because you can't always be happy.

>> You can't always be there. >> You can't always put aside your work and show up for her. She's now becoming 8 years old. That is a good age for her to manage without you. So, because you're projecting your past, you see, you're imagining it's much worse than it may actually be. Does that make sense? >> It makes sense. Yeah. She goes into very specific fears at night when we're going to sleep that she explains to me. She's very expressive, like I was when I was a child, I was shut down. She's expressive like to the nth degree, but she'll say in great detail what she's afraid of, like creepy things like, "I'm afraid of a man coming into our house and here's what he's going to do next." And then she'll get it out and where did these fears come from? And then I she goes, "And I'm safe." And you promise that'll never happen. And as a parent, I'm saying, "Of course, I promise." And then she falls asleep. And then I'm laying there going blink blink. That's not something I can promise. And then I'm worried about >> Right. Right. I think your daughter is sensitive and maybe very imaginative. I mean, this is presuming nothing has happened to her. Right.

>> Right. Right. >> Right. So, we're going to presume that. So, these are normal 8-year-old, 10-year-old fears of thinking of the boogeyman coming in and a thief coming in. These are normal fears. But because you remember your trauma, in those moments, your panic becomes so high. But if you can just realize that this is quite normal, quite understandable. She's looking for you to give her confidence. She's looking for you. She's testing you also to make sure that you're not going to get derailed by her anxiety. So >> yeah, >> if you can be powerful and strong and trust her to figure her own fears out when you're not around, that'll actually give her the muscle to figure her fears out when you're not around. If you pander to her and give in and say, "Okay, if you're scared to be without me, I'm going to be there every minute."

You're actually telling her that she cannot survive without you. >> Yeah. >> It's a very tricky thing because you want to reassure her. You want to comfort her, but you know that she doesn't need you. She's fine. If you drop her to a playdate or you drop her to grandma's house or you take her for a piano lesson and you've made sure it's safe, then you know she can be okay. But if you give her the feeling that she can't handle it, then she's actually going to become fragile.

>> Yeah. I feel like we're in this transition. I'm trying to find my footing where I was curating her environment. And since I can't do that, I think I'm like, "Okay, how do I help her feel safe inside?" >> Yes. Now, let me ask you, because you were sexually traumatized, do you feel like you're extra vigilant and extra careful and extra nervous about this coming to pass with her? >> I think the only place I feel that is with sleepovers.

>> Yeah. >> But we're not quite there, and she's nowhere near comfortable with that idea. But no, I do feel like we're safe. I do feel like we are in safe families, safe setting. Yeah. >> Wonderful. Wonderful. So look at what you have given her. You have literally made it safe. But I think in your desire to, as you said, curate her environment, you may give yourself a false sense of control. >> Yeah. Right. >> You don't have this false sense of control. So don't put it on you. Life is difficult and unpredictable and chaotic and your children will still get hurt despite your best intentions. You cannot protect your children from everything.

So, I need you to kind of release that pressure you're putting that you are the gatekeeper and you are the warden and you are going to keep her in this very protected, you know, kind of prison. You can't do that. You have to open the gates and let her experience life. And if things happen, then you're going to deal with it with power and courage and strength. But you have to wait for that. You're trying to be so preventative that you're actually going to make it suffocating and make her feel like she's living in an unsafe world.

>> Yeah. So the kind of next level from here is also she is protected from the news for example, just because I protect myself from the news to be happy. So even if she gets a hint of a news story because the people around us are talking about it, she picks up on it and I think, "Oh gosh, she doesn't even know the actual kind of concerning things that can happen around us." And when she hears it, she's going to be, you know, really, really scared.

>> Yeah. So you want to not be so protective about that. You don't want it to be the news on 24/7 because that's ridiculous because news can be so fear-mongering. But you also don't want to wrap her up in this synthetic bubble and kind of take her through life as if nothing can ever happen because then when it does happen, she's going to be completely bamboozled. >> Right. Right. >> So, it's not easy, but I think you're trying very hard and maybe too hard to bubble wrap her. And [clears throat] you're doing that because life was unsafe for you because you were traumatized. But it's okay. It's okay for her to fall down. It's okay for her to experience some shocks of life. She's not going to fall apart because you've given her very different life. You fell apart because you really did go through a trauma. But she's not going to do that, mama. You've done a great job. I think that there is a lot of fear and panic that comes up in me when I see her meltdown or have big fears or emotionally fall apart in a big way. I never did it. And so I almost feel like, oh my gosh, it is the end of the world.

>> Yeah. Because you perhaps suppressed your feelings. You perhaps were not given a safe space for them. So now when you see somebody having a meltdown, your child, you feel like if she's expressing so much, it must be really bad versus, oh my goodness, she feels so safe and this is normal and I was not normal because I was suppressing. >> Yeah, that's a big light bulb. >> Your child feels very safe. You never felt safe. This is normal to express anxiety, to feel some fears, but it isn't normal to feel as an eight-year-old that I cannot manage without my mother 24/7.

>> Yeah. >> So, you need to give her the confidence that she can manage. >> I'm really working through the resistance to her big feelings. That helped a lot. I Your books got me so far. >> Yes. >> As far as understanding, whoa, I'm really resisting something that's just happening. Because you never had big feelings. You see, >> right? >> Because you never had big feelings, you were never safe to express. The big feelings feel very scary for you.

But this is your next evolution to allow her big feelings to allow your feelings.

That would be a wonderful thing if through her big feelings, you allow yourself to also remember your past and honor your past and acknowledge what you've been through and heal yourself through that. Yeah. And when I do set a boundary or say, you know, I'm going to have you try this without me and she has a big feeling to understand, put perspective on that and understand just because she's having the big feeling doesn't mean it's the end of the world and to continue anyway.

>> Yes. That she can push through it and through the expression and pushing through she will come to the other side. suppression will never bring her to the other side. It is expression and working through it that'll bring her to the other side. >> Yeah, that helps a lot. >> Good. So, now practice giving her a boundary and you can come back quickly to show her that, see, mommy came back, but I definitely would encourage you to not be afraid to push her through that tunnel because it would do her a lot of good to see that she can handle herself.

>> Yeah, that makes sense. That helps so much. through your work I realized what I appreciate so much is is feeling you know the ahas of the oh this is a blind spot and feeling like okay I'm working through it but I know I have more >> wonderful wonderful well this is your next step so practice and thank you so much for sharing >> thank you so much Dr. So many times in our parenting when we witness our children going through an emotion if we happen to go through a similar emotion in our childhood we interpret our child's feelings through the lens of our experience. This is what is called projection. We do this with our spouses with our friends and certainly with our children because we went through an experience in a particular way. If we witness the other going through it, it's just natural for us to interpret their behavior or their experience through our lens. But here's where we make a tragic mistake. In doing that, we make a misinterpretation. We make assumptions and then we react to the other one as if we know what they're going through. But many times we have no idea. So holding space for the unknown and keeping the awareness that our experience even though it may look similar to what our children or our spouse is going through is something that is unique to us. We need to remember that our experiences were very particular to who we are, our history, our culture, our epigenetics. And as much as it looks similar, again, it is uniquely ours. When we hold space for that, we can then tune into what the person in front of us, namely our children, are going through and then connect to their experience without imposing our agenda. So in this mother's case, because she went through so much trauma and because she suppressed her emotions, she now cannot handle her child's emotions. And so she projects that because her child is having such big emotions, it must be the end of the world. But it isn't. Each person just has a different way of experiencing their life situation. So projection is a tricky thing indeed. We all fall into it, especially with our children. And becoming a conscious parent means to become mindful of these projections and hold space for the possibility that each one of us can have entirely unique life experiences no matter how similar they may appear on the surface. Coming up next, a couple who wants to help their daughters with their bedtime fears and anxiety.

We're now going to meet Abel and his wife Monica. They say that their five and sevenyear-old daughters are struggling with bedtime fears [music] and anxiety. Hi Abel and Monica. Welcome. Thank you for being here. >> Hi Victor Shafali. >> Hi Dr. Shafali. Thank you so much for having us. >> So you say that your daughters are struggling at bedtime and other anxieties. So tell me a little bit when did this start? >> Okay. This started early

2024. Okay.

>> Our 70-year-old daughter, she started having these fears and anxiety at the moment of going to bed and she didn't want us to leave. We we usually cuddle in with her a bit at the moment that we wanted to, you know, good night, good night kiss. She would get really anxious. So, we started investigating. We started going a little bit deep into it. And she started telling us that she was scared that we were going to pass away, that something really bad was going to happen to us, to me, to Monica.

>> And this is your 7-year-old, and this began last year. >> Yes. Yes. >> Okay. So, she has some bedtime fears, some fears around your death, not seeing you again. And what about your younger one? >> We need to be right next also in the bed before we leave. But so far not a lot of struggles with her in that regard. >> Okay. So it's mainly your older daughter. >> Yes. >> So besides these fears of bedtime and not seeing you again, do you see her being afraid in other areas of her life as well? No, she's very confident and yeah, we were like thinking, you know, because just to give you like a little bit of a background until she was like 3 years old, we can say that we were not like very conscious parents, right?

>> So, you start wondering like is there something that I'm doing wrong? This is something that I'm causing, you know? And then she started opening more to me and saying, you know what, mom, I don't feel happy. You know, you see me and you think that I'm happy, but everything that is happening is taking away my happiness. So after that, I was like, we need to do something now like >> because we were like very worried at that point.

>> So at that point, we looked for a psychologist. So she started going and after a while she helped us to figure out that you know there are a lot of things that you don't think at the moment how they can affect your kids and the thing is that a bail had a cat accident at the end of April. >> They weren't there. So you never think okay they're not there so why would this impact them in any way? But turns out it did. She was afraid that something bad especially would happen to me after the car accident.

>> So that was like when we started with the psychologist it was really good because we were like putting a puzzle together because we didn't know exactly what was going on. So she say okay during one session she mentioned the car accident and we were like of course why we didn't think about that right so >> and then other things came up right so >> then we found out that the that of one of her friends passed away and we didn't know that right so we were like oh wow like that's what happened right so and pain >> the passing away of the father was in February of 2024 >> and the accident was in April so maybe that triggered something in addition and she associated of course father accident passing away and she's a very said also by the psychology so she's a very empathic sensitive smart girl for her age >> right so when you put it all together in this package does it make sense then that she's afraid and anxious at night Yeah, because like in the day she's acting normal. She's very social. She's playing all day with her sister, but at night before going to bed is when she start, you know, like saying things and mom, I don't feel well about this or about that.

>> Yeah. Yeah. But fortunately, you know, with the with the help of the psychologist, we have to say that she's evolved. She's made a lot of improvement. She's taking a lot of initiative of, you know what, mom and dad,

tonight I'm going to try and do it by myself. >> Wow. >> Without a, you know, bribing or pushing, you know, we don't do that anymore, of course. >> And she's the one that tells us and then she's reading a book about the sleepovers.

>> Wonderful. So, she wants to do a sleepover by herself with her friends from school. We're like, "If you feel okay with it, go for it, >> right? >> We're going to support you. We're here for you." And it's all, you know, intrinsic motivation that's coming out of her. >> So, it sounds like it makes sense to you why she's anxious. And once you can understand that, you just need to help her process her feelings and express them. It may take time and you have to reassure her and but she seems to be making progress and moving forward.

>> We think so. >> So, is there a particular area of her life that you feel confused by or overwhelmed by? I think we're still struggling with bedtime because with that anxiety plus as Ael mentioned it at the beginning her or her sister they are not able at this point to fall asleep by themselves. So we are still you know because you read so much things that oh kids they should be sleeping independently but we have been more on the side that we like to go sleep and all of that. So sometimes it's challenging, right? Because with this anxiety and all of that, okay, you want to be with her, but at the same time, you want them to learn how to sleep by themselves, right? So sometimes we have our discussions because sometimes we don't have like a lot of like a clear path about that. So >> So right now they all they both sleep with you in your bed?

>> No. But 2 or 3 hours later, boom, they show up. >> Right. Right. Right. Well, you know, I think that's normal. But I think yes, you should both be with them at night and put them to bed. And yes, they will get up and then you may have to take them back to the bed. But I think it is about this transition till they become fully independent sleepers that you may have to do this back and forth or be in their room and then come to your room or whatever way it looks. It is messy but I think it's a transition and I think slowly they will become independent sleepers but it does take time. It's a journey and you're doing it in a conscious loving sweet connected way but I don't think you should be afraid to keep allowing them to feel that they can be independent right slowly but of course they're free to come to your bed but then they go back to their room. I think that this will be the way it is for the next one or two years at least for the older one and eventually she will come to a place where she will prefer to be in her bed and you know I think it's healthy for a couple to have their space uh so I wouldn't encourage you to make this like a lifelong habit uh because then sometimes I have teenagers who are still sleeping in their parents' beds right and then that erodes the couple's privacy I think loving connection, kindness, and empathy the way you're doing it, but also build the facility, the capacity to be independent, to go back to the room.

They can do it, but it'll take time. >> Yeah. Yeah. I think so. They can do it. And actually, recently, like two weeks ago, I was lying in bed with her and she was like, "You know what, Dad? Just leave, get your book, cuz I I read my books and then come back, sit on that chair, and I'll fall asleep by myself." Right? >> I was like, "Are you sure?" He was like, "Yes, I'm sure. I want to do it. I want to try." I was like, "Okay." But this happened two weeks ago. Like you said, it's a journey, right? And uh it's not overnight.

>> And again, you don't even have to ask her if she's sure. >> Okay. >> Because suppose she messes up, it's okay.

But the fact that she's willing to try, that is amazing. Don't second guess her by saying, "Are you sure?" Right? Because that's second guessing her. >> Okay. But I think children's anxieties are mostly normal and it really depends on the response from the parents. And if you don't get caught up in their anxiety and you can hold your own space and not project your anxieties onto them, oh my goodness, she must be feeling a certain way because I used to feel this way. If you can just allow your children to have a unique experience without contaminating it with anything, either judgment or shame or punishment or your own experience, they will eventually grow out and become more autonomous.

It's a process, but that's what your children are going to do. And they're looking to you to hold that light, to say, "You can do it. You can do it. I know you can do it. Everybody does it eventually. So, I know you're going to do it, too. But you can take your time, right? You can do it, but you can take your time. Then the child doesn't feel the pressure. >> It was the first thing we talked about because we used to get so anxious and upset maybe 2, three years ago and then I remember talking, you know, to Suzanne Tucker.

>> Mhm. >> Which we came across through your summit. >> Yes. and she gave us some tools and write down the anxiety and I think that was the first step we took back then you know stop you know like you said projecting the anxiety on the poor little girl otherwise it's not nothing's going to work if we don't solve our issues first >> that's right >> right >> and that's one of the things we did but now yeah we're we're >> and even the fact that she's anxious about your death now that you know there's a reason for her to be anxious, right? There's something that happened in her life. You can say, "I know you're nervous because your friend's father passed away or daddy had an accident, but let me tell you, these things happen only once in a while. It doesn't happen all the time. Please just talk about your fears. You can make her draw. You can make her write. Don't hide from her fears. Allowing her to express them will actually allow her to manage them. And when she says it out loud and shares her fears with you, she immediately reduces in her anxiety because now it's shared, right? Like when you go to a friend and you share your heart or you go to a therapist and you share your feelings, you feel less alone in the world. You feel like, oh, I can manage this with this person. I have shared with this person. So sharing is really a positive thing. Although many parents feel overwhelmed and get triggered.

>> Yeah. But sharing is actually them saying here take the burden and hold the burden with me. You know, she's showing you that she trusts you with that. >> Okay, that's really good to know. >> Yes. Well, thank you so much both of you for coming and showing up and for doing the work and being conscious parents. That's just very very lovely to watch that both of you are committed to conscious parenting. >> Thanks to you Shafali. Thank you so much for having us. In both of these stories, we could see how we as parents get so tripped up when our kids have anxiety or big emotions. I know that I have been so overwhelmed every time my daughter has had big emotions. I feel responsible. I feel guilty. I feel shamed that I should have done things better. And I also often project what I have gone through in my life onto what I think she is going through. and contaminate her life experience and not just that contaminate the connection that we could have with each other. And if there's one takeaway from today's episode, I would like you to contemplate how it is that we project onto our children, especially when they are anxious. Are we able to sit with them, allow space for their feelings without getting defensive, without taking it personally, without rushing in to fix and micromanage?

Can we simply bear witness to our children when they express anxiety? Can we allow them to feel the safety of our presence, of our observance, of trusting that we will hold the light for them? Instead, many of us fall apart, we overreact, we shut down, or we begin to fix. None of these help our children process their feelings or come to the other side.

True processing and integration of emotions requires a safe space to express our feelings. Can we offer our children that safe space to express? Let's try to do this not only with our children but also with ourselves and our partners and our friends without judgment, without projection, without overreaction. I truly believe this is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children and each other. If you enjoyed listening to this podcast and you want to learn more about these skills, if you want more support in your parenting, then check out my conscious community. I just launched this community and it is a sanctuary for like-minded and like-hearted individuals like yourself. Many of the followers of this podcast are members of my conscious community. I have a little group for parents of kids under the age of six. I have a group for parents of teenagers. I have a group for single mothers, for those going through a divorce, for those going through menopause, and so much more. I do weekly webinars. I have monthly workshops. I have my team and I offering daily guidance and insights. If you are longing for a community and to interact with me on a more personal basis and learn what I do, join my community. It is called the conscious circle. If you've enjoyed listening to this podcast, I truly hope I will see you on the next episode of Parenting and You with me, Dr. Shafali.

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