Introducing Dr Anna Colton

Dr Anna Colton is a Chartered Clinical Psychologist with over 20 years’ experience of working with children and adolescents. Some of her particular areas of expertise include eating disorders, body image, performance anxiety and stage fright. Dr Colton regularly appears on radio and television, being a repeat guest expert on ITV's This Morning and has helped develop a number of resources for BBC Bitesize and BBC Teach on topics including body image, exam stress and school transition.

Top Takeaways from the ‘Get a Grip’ Blog with Dr Anna Colton

Managing performance pressure

- All children ultimately want to please their parents and it can be difficult as parents to strike the balance between having high aspirations for children yet not putting their mental health under strain. Dr Colton’s advice for parents is to appreciate the bigger picture of achievement and take a long term view. The job of parents is to empower and equip children with the tools to thrive in life. This includes helping a child see that their whole identity or self-worth is not wrapped up in one set of exams or type of achievement.
- Parents should know their child’s strengths and weaknesses so that they appreciate different grades or levels of achievement depending on how hard their child finds a particular subject or task.
- Dr Colton uses the terminology ‘higher entry level talent’ to describe how some things come more naturally to us than others. Others with ‘less entry level talent’ will have to work harder to get to the same starting place. Often, in areas where a child has ‘high entry level talent’ they can feel more pressure to achieve, as people expect them to do well and maintain a high level of achievement. Dr Colton advises that parents should be very transparent with their child in this situation by saying something like “you are really good at this, but it doesn’t mean you will get to win every time or that you have to be perfect” and explain that levels of performance go up and down. Help your child to appreciate, with a real life examples that even the greatest athlete or high performer has good races/matches/events and poorer ones. Make clear that no one is brilliant all the time.
- Remind young people that external factors, things outside of their control, also influence performance, so a single result should not define them.
- Help young people have good ‘sportsmanship’, talk about how to lose well and be magnanimous in defeat. Parents have to show children what they value, they have to model how they want children to behave in victory and loss. Dealing with loss or victory can feel overwhelming for children, it is a good idea to talk in advance about how to respond in either scenario.
- Dr Colton advises parents help children manage a balance between achievement and time-off. Using an analogy can be helpful, explaining ‘sweets and chocolates are delicious but if every meal and snack was sweets and chocolate that wouldn’t be so nice and it wouldn’t be nutritious so it is important to have variety – in our diet and in our schedule - to thrive.’
What to do if an 8 or 9 year old daughter declares ‘I’m fat’ when they are not? First ask them why they say that, be curious and listen to what they say. What do they even mean? What does ‘fat’ mean to them? Is that what they think or have other people said that? It could be helpful to then explain that everyone develops and grows at different speeds, you may need to explain/remind them that during puberty girls have to put on weight and their bodies have to change shape. Be factual about this, while understanding that this can be difficult. Ask about what the chat is at school and gently challenge it if it’s wrong or unhelpful. It is important not to instantly dismiss the claim with ‘Oh, you’re not fat, don’t be silly’ because with this response they are less likely to confide in you again with their feelings or concerns.

It can help to gently encourage children to challenge their own belief with questions such as ‘What would other people say?’ ‘Here’s a weight chart for your age and height, what category are you in?’

Watch what you say as a parent about your body. If they see or hear you complain about your ‘wobbly bits’ or ‘I hate my legs’ or ‘if only I could lose a stone’ it will reinforce their body criticisms. Try and use positive language about body shape – ‘athletic’, ‘strong’, ‘powerful’.

If a child has a celebrity role model who they want to be like, ask them what else they like about the person, beyond their appearance – is it their success, their creativity, their confidence? Take the emphasis off just their appearance.

Before introducing a mobile phone/access to social media spend time with your child preparing them so they understand that it does not reflect reality. Explain that all of the images they will see will have been selected, from probably hundreds of other photos, because they are the most flattering – no one uploads a ‘bad’ photo!

Don’t allow your child to use apps before they are old enough (check what the app age limit is and stick to this). Stick to your guns! Your child may tell you that they are the only child not allowed to use the app in their class. This probably isn’t true.

Help your child to realise that one day someone might remove them from a group, or they could encounter some unpleasantness directed at them or someone else within an on-line group. Help them think about how they would do? Will they leave the group? If they were to stay, would that mean they were complicit in the unpleasantness? Help them think about how they are going to conduct themselves on line. If they set up a group, what are reasonable ground rules?

Parents should be mindful about what they post online about their children. Families should together agree how, when, where and who will share family images.

Puberty should be discussed with children before it starts. For most girls puberty starts between 9-11 years and for most boys it starts a little later. A lovely book for girls is called ‘Ready, set, grow’ by Lynda Madaras. Dr Colton suggests a transparent, factual approach is best. Explain: it happens at different ages, it is natural, it is a process taking a few years, if you’ve started early then you’ll finish early and can help your friends through, I’ll help you with any of the challenges. Be pragmatic and calm or show some excitement. If you show worry, concern, disappointment (oh no, my little girl is growing up) then it sends a message that something is wrong. Parents should help a child feel empowered to cope.

Eating Disorders

More children are presenting with eating disorders. Dr Colton has seen a rise in both girls and boys and younger children with eating disorders. She has also seen a surge in self-harm.

Eating disorder ‘red flags’ to watch out for include: a big change in weight; tearfulness or stress around mealtimes, suddenly becoming a fussy eater, visiting the bathroom immediately after meals, reporting feeling sick before a meal, increased body checking.
A parent with even the tiniest concern that their child might have an eating disorder should seek help and advice. Dr Anna Colton advises, don’t sit and wait, eating disorders are much more responsive to treatment if caught early and the longer they are left untreated the more entrenched they become.

From her experience, Dr Colton explains, at their root eating disorders are a way of coping with intolerable feelings. At the start extreme dieting and starvation works as a powerful way of feeling in control and suppressing feelings. It works initially and then tricks you that it keeps working but it doesn’t and you become trapped trying more and more extreme dieting to feel back in control.

The sorts of things people may feel out of control about are numerous, it could friendships, growing up, parental relationships, bullying, bodily changes or many other things.

If there is any emotional upheaval or distress many children can feel reluctant to talk to their parents because they are worried about upsetting their parents and want to protect them. Also they could be worried that a parent might over react and take more control away from them. Parents need to create an environment in which children know they can tell them anything and that their parent is going to be resilient enough to hear it and cope. Dr Anna Colton suggests making this message explicit – ‘You can tell me anything and I will listen and help’. ‘Whatever you tell me, you will be ok, I will be ok and it will be ok.’ Children need to believe that someone will be on their side and love them unconditionally.

**Transition to secondary school and university**

- Convey a message of optimism and excitement. Parents should be delighted that their child is taking the next step. Show confidence in them that they will cope and there is nothing to worry about.
- A good experience of transition to secondary school can help with a later transition to university. Before going to university a young person should have experienced some independence and freedom, ideally having spent some time away from home and managing on their own so it is not all new.

**Overall**

- Dr Colton encourages parents to keep an open dialogue with their children, she urges them not to be frightened or worry that if they talk about a topic it will put the idea into their heads. So saying ‘are you feeling down today?’, is not going to make a child feel depressed, talking about sex will not encourage them to have sex, but it will mean that your child knows they can talk to their parents about anything.

**To get in touch with Dr Anna Colton**

If you want help and advice and to arrange an appointment with Dr Anna Colton then go to her website:

[www.dranna.co.uk](http://www.dranna.co.uk)