

Cole is 10 years old and now in grade 5 - his second year at Brooklyn Elementary. He has always been a thoughtful kid. He values close relationships and has always preferred a small bubble over a big one. Looking back on his early years, Cole's worries were there long before he had words to express them. Instead of getting smaller though, his worries seemed to grow bigger every year, increasingly guiding his choices (and ours too). We didn't intentionally feed Cole's fears but I can now see the slippery slope that we traveled. As his parents, we wanted to protect Cole from the weight of his worries, hear him laugh, see him try new things, and go to school without losing sleep over it. Before we knew it though, we were altering our family routine, our work schedules, and heading down a path that was not sustainable. Cole's worries were growing beyond what we could manage on our own.

We tried all the usual experiences that parents want to give their kids - preschool, swimming lessons, birthday parties, visiting friends. Our first child had craved these experiences and flourished in each of them, but Cole's perspective was different. When it came to separating from his tribe, he was apprehensive, uncertain, and weighted in worry. He could see the fun he was missing, but the risk felt too great. Occasionally he could put it to words, "What if something happens to you or you don't come back to get me?" Until this year, Cole never played at a friend's house without a parent. Despite being athletic, he avoided all recreational activities unless one of us was coaching. He avoided school field trips. Although going to school was non-negotiable, it became increasingly stressful every year. In 2020, after being homeschooled and largely sheltered from all opportunities for separation, the prospect of returning to school, and a new school at that, felt mountainous. Cole wanted to continue homeschooling and we considered this but we knew it would be for the wrong reasons - we couldn't let the anxiety win and narrow Cole's world even further.

On the first day of school in September 2020, our oldest child couldn't wait to find his line up on the field. Our youngest, starting kindergarten, was hesitant but his curiosity and excitement prevailed. Cole, in grade 4, clung to us as if headed down a path to certain death. "I felt scared and cornered and sick to my stomach." Parents were not allowed onto the school grounds or into the school because of Covid. It was a helpless feeling. As the classes filed into the school, Cole remained firmly at our side. It was then that our principal introduced us to Tara Ryan, SD 71 District Outreach Counsellor. Tara explained that her primary job was to help kids who had difficulty separating and going to school. Speaking to Cole, she made it clear that she wasn't there to pull him away or trick him into going into the school. This took a huge weight off. It was the opposite messaging to everything we'd encountered in previous years. I felt my guard lower and Cole's grip slacken. Meeting Tara marked the beginning of our journey out from under Cole's anxiety.

Cole did go into school that first day but only long enough to check out his desk and classroom. It was the first step. Over the course of that week, we (my husband and I and Cole) met with Tara every day to come up with a plan. We talked about anxiety, it's importance in protecting us, but also how powerful it can become. Cole named his worry - a strategy which allowed him to separate himself from it, and for the first time, begin to consider that he could take control of it. There was a glimmer. The hardest but most effective strategy that Tara introduced was our "script". Together with Cole, we came up with a morning drop-off script that we would commit to strictly - every word, every hug and kiss, where we would stand, who Cole would walk to,

how much time he would spend in school, etc. Cole had a huge part in designing the script. “10 minutes felt really scary, but I knew I had to try it.” So that’s where we started.

As conservative as a 10-minute school day sounds, the first few weeks were rough. It was hard for us as Cole’s parents not to give him that extra hug (or 5!) when he was clearly struggling - wanting so badly to stretch his comfort zone but having to fight so hard to do it. Some days the weight of it was too much. “My stomach was so full of butterflies that I worried I would throw up.” The rule was that if we couldn’t get through the script, we had to go home (for a purposefully arduous day of school work) and wait until the next day to try again. We had to have 2 successful days of getting through the script before we could add more time. The separation piece was the hardest. Once he was in school, Cole started to feel the community he had there and he wanted to be a part of it, but the getting into school was stressful. For the first three weeks, we stayed at 10-minute days. As we moved into October, I worried about how much Cole was missing (socially, academically, etc.) but I also knew that the journey we were on was an important one. Without fail, Cole’s team (Tara, his incredible EA Mrs. McInnis, his supportive teacher Mrs. Devine, and us/his parents) showed up every morning. Everybody was going the extra mile for Cole and he felt this. It lifted him, and before long, he was really striving to do the same. Eventually, Cole increased his time to 15 minutes, ...then 18, ...then 20. We started to feel some momentum. The more time Cole spent in school, the more he wanted to be there. “I really liked my teacher and the activities we were doing.” We still had days of returning home after not following the script (often on a Monday) but steadily we were moving forward. Later in October, we added in an afternoon drop off as well to create another daily practice opportunity. By that point, Cole seemed to feel trust and safety in the script. It gave him predictability.

By December, Cole was increasing his school time by 15 minutes most weeks. His comfort and confidence were growing incrementally. Most days, when we picked him up, he hadn’t noticed the added minutes. He was visibly happier and more relaxed than we’d ever seen him. We worked continuously throughout the school year, following our script, connecting with Cole’s team every day, and connecting with Cole each night. By the spring, Cole didn’t need the script as much and we let some of the details fade away. One day when Cole’s EA was absent, a detail that previously would have completely derailed the script, Cole said to his teacher “I’m okay without Mrs. McInnis today.” In June, he started going full days.

Although most of our journey took place at school, on the sideline my husband and I did an online 10-week course called “Confident Parents, Thriving Kids” through the BC Mental Health Association. It is a referral-based program for parents of anxious kids. It was there that we learned how our protective instincts had unwittingly supported Cole’s anxiety and how we could do things differently, all of which paralleled what we were doing at school.

Back in September, I hadn’t thought it would take us a full school year to tackle the goal of full days, but in the thick of it, on those hardest days, I knew there was work to be done and I was proud of us for doing it. We had spent years letting the anxiety build and we were committed to whatever time and process were needed to undo that. It was often hard to juggle such a commitment with work and the rest of our family life but we had a team that believed

wholeheartedly in Cole and in us as his parents, so we kept going. In the end, it has been life changing.

One of Cole's biggest realizations was that he was the star player of the team. He was expected not only to show up, but to take part in decisions and follow through. It was a big set of shoes to step into, but once he did, he was empowered by the process. The worry still creeps in at times, though we all recognize it much sooner now. Cole's world is expanding. Without the burden of his worry, there is room to breathe, space to learn, and confidence to try new things. Best of all, he is happier. He is proud of the grit he worked through last year and he knows that he is capable of doing really hard things. "Now when I look back and I was only staying in school for 10 minutes, I can't believe it was so hard."

As this latest school year approached, I didn't feel the usual rise in my own worry. My protective instincts weren't needed. I knew Cole was okay. On the first day of school Cole was really nervous, but he found his class, lined up with them, and went into school. It was amazing - a moment not to be taken for granted.