

The Anxious Child

Anxiety is a normal emotional state that everyone experiences at one time or another. We all need a certain amount of anxiety or fear in order to protect ourselves from life's dangerous situations. For children, a certain amount of worry and fear is a natural part of growing up. Fears of the dark, monsters, and strangers are normal and evolve into fears of social acceptance and school achievement as children develop. Common sources of anxiety for children arise from everyday life transitions such as starting school, moving to a new home, or dealing with the death of an elderly grandparent. When challenging events occur that are outside of the ordinary for a child such as separation or divorce, a natural disaster or exposure to family violence, the likelihood of more serious forms of anxiety increases.

Although quite common, anxiety disorders in children are often overlooked or mislabeled. This is unfortunate because they are very treatable conditions when given proper psychological and medical intervention. Distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy levels of anxiety depends largely upon the degree of distress and its effect on a child's daily functioning. Anxiety becomes a problem when it prevents a child from enjoying normal life experiences. Often the fear is out of proportion to the actual threat or excessive in relation to an anticipated future event. Severe anxiety can affect a child's thought processes, perceptions, focus and concentration, learning, and decision-making.

Signs of excessive anxiety in children may include the following:

- Excessive clinginess, crying, or other signs of regression to earlier stages of development
- Increased irritability, anger, aggression, or tantrums
- Disturbed sleep (i.e. difficulty falling or staying asleep, nightmares, or night terrors)
- Physical complaints such as stomach aches, headaches, body aches, and fatigue
- Constant worry about what might happen or preoccupation with past events
- Rigidity, self-criticism, negative thinking patterns, guilt, and self-blame
- Withdrawal from family, friends and activities
- Perfectionism
- Impaired memory function
- Difficulty with focus and concentration
- Problems at school (i.e. difficulty working in groups, decreased participation in class, or trouble making friends)

Anxious children can benefit a great deal from support from their parents. Here are some helpful things you can do when dealing with anxious behaviours in your child:

- See your family doctor or pediatrician to rule out any physical cause for symptoms.
- Identify any environmental factors that might be contributing to your child's anxiety and make necessary adjustments. These could include taking better care of yourself and your relationships, or improving communication with your child's teacher.
- Establish consistent daily routines and structure. Routines reduce anxiety and regular daily patterns emphasize predictability. A regular schedule will give a sense of control to both you and your child. Anxious children do not cope well with a disorganized, spontaneous family life style.
- Highly anxious children can appear demanding and can become very emotional if things do not go their way. This can confuse parents who often shift to a more permissive parenting style in order to avoid emotional outbursts. It is important for children to have limits set and to be aware of consequences for breaking the limits. Children feel more secure when limits are set on inappropriate behaviors.
- Ensure good sleep habits including a regular bedtime and set bedtime routine. Shut down any screen time a minimum of 30 minutes before bedtime to avoid excess stimulation. Reading together at bedtime is a good way to unwind and connect with your child.

- Keep your child healthy. Not eating nutritious meals at regular intervals can contribute to your child's stress. Limit the amount of sugar and processed foods in the home and make healthy snacks readily available.
- Set aside regular time with your child and listen to their fears without judgment. Encourage them to identify their feelings and model how to communicate feelings effectively. Use everyday problems as opportunities to teach problem solving skills. Even 15 minutes of one to one time after school to discuss events of the day can positively influence your child.
- Computers, TV and video games can increase worry and sadness. Limit your child's screen time and closely monitor the content. It is also recommended to limit your child's exposure to upsetting stories and news events. Often these can trigger upsets and exacerbate anxiety. Replace screen time with physical activity, which boosts endorphins and contributes to restful sleep.
- Avoid over scheduling your child. Select and encourage participation in an activity that your child enjoys and does well. Allowing time for free play will contribute to your child's well being.
- Help your child to understand that the negative things they are saying to themselves are not helpful and can make them feel worse. Changing unhelpful thoughts to more positive or encouraging thoughts will help to reduce anxiety. Allow your child plenty of time to express their negative thoughts before helping them to figure out more helpful ways of thinking. Teach helpful relaxation skills such as deep breathing or visualization.
- Set a calm example for your child when dealing with daily frustrations in your own life. Remember that children learn mostly from what they see you do.

When symptoms of anxiety intensify, persist, or include any reference to suicide or self-harm seek professional consultation with a practitioner who specializes in the treatment of children. Remember that there are variations and degrees of anxiety, and symptoms are treatable. Children and parents can greatly benefit from the guidance and support of a trained professional.