



ANXIETY: UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S WORRIES AND FEARS

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Does this sound like your child?

- clinging, crying and/or tantrums when you separate?
- excessive shyness, avoiding social situations?
- constant or out-of-proportion worry?
- fear of strangers or unknown places?
- frequent stomach aches or headaches?
- bad temper or moodiness?
- trouble sleeping, poor appetite?
- experiencing sudden and frequent panic attacks?
- refusal to go to school?

You are not alone!

- Anxiety disorders are one of the primary mental health problems affecting children and adolescents today.
- Symptoms are often internalized, and therefore, difficult to detect.
- It is one of the mental health concerns with the earliest onset.
- Anxiety can get worse over time if not addressed.

What is Anxiety?

- A physiological reaction to real or perceived danger or important events.
- Anxiety is adaptive: fight, flight or freeze - prepares us for danger - e.g. heightened awareness, vigilance.
- It is normal, even at times helpful at a certain amount, e.g. increases motivation to study, prepare for a game, etc. Without a certain level of anxiety, we would not survive or thrive.
- It is not dangerous, though it feels uncomfortable; it is temporary and will eventually decrease.

In the body:

- increased heart rate
- rapid, shallow breathing /shortness of breath/holding breath
- stomach ache/nausea/diarrhea
- shivering/sweating/shaking
- numbness/tingling
- headaches/dizziness/light-headedness
- chest pain
- choking sensation
- feeling detached/unreal

In the mind/head:

- People with anxiety worry
 - they predict negative outcomes
 - they believe they cannot cope with a particular challenge.
 - they engage in overgeneralization, catastrophic thinking and other cognitive distortions.

Behaviourally:

- Children who are anxious can show avoidant behaviour.
- Children who are anxious can seek constant reassurance.
- Children who are anxious can engage in inappropriate safety regimens

Causes

- There are many reasons for anxiety. It can be triggered in children by:
 - genes/family history
 - separation from a parent or trusted caregiver
 - academic difficulties/challenges with peers
 - family stress/changes/transitions
 - specific fears (thunder, the dark, spiders or certain noises).
- Sometimes there is no trigger. A child might feel a general sense of anxiety for no particular reason.

Normal Fears

- Many children go through states of fears at different ages.
- It is normal for young children to show some anxiety around strangers, fears of monsters, the dark, questions about death, etc.

When does anxiety become a problem?

- when it is out of proportion to the reality of the situation
- when it becomes paralyzing and/or interferes with one's daily functioning.

Anxiety Disorders

- More severe anxiety is significant and long lasting – several weeks to several months – and warrants intervention.
- There are seven different types of childhood anxiety disorders.
- A child may be diagnosed with more than one type of anxiety disorder at the same time, or with type disorder, e.g. ADHD, ASD, etc.

Types of Anxiety Disorders:

- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Specific Phobias
- Social-Anxiety Disorder
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

What can you do?

- Four steps:
 - Learn about anxiety
 - Learn specific relaxation techniques - calm breathing, muscle relaxation, visualization
 - Gently challenge scary/worrisome thoughts
 - Help children to face fears or problem-solve an anxiety provoking situation (start easy)

Helpful vs. unhelpful thoughts

Situation: Not being invited to a birthday party

Unhelpful thought:

- Nobody likes me
- I am the only one not invited

Helpful thought:

- Maybe it was a small get-together
- I have other good friends

Helpful vs. unhelpful thoughts Situation: girls looking and laughing

Unhelpful Thought:

- They are laughing AT me
- I must look stupid

Helpful Thought:

- They must be laughing at something funny and I just happen to be here
- I don't really know if they were laughing at me, they could be laughing about anything

What can you do?

- Ask questions:
 - What is making you feel scared?
 - What are you worried will happen?
 - What bad thing do you expect to happen in this situation?

What can you do?

- Parenting tips:
 - Simplify afterschool activities
 - Develop consistent family routines
 - Give consequences for inappropriate behaviour
 - Be supportive and encourage independence
 - Avoid giving excessive reassurance
 - Have realistic expectations
 - Manage your own anxieties

Mild to moderate anxiety can be managed at home/school

- **Listen** to your child without judgement.
- **Model** facing fears – provide support and encouragement – allow child to work at own pace.
- Normalize
- Educate
- Praise!

When is it time to ask for help?

- It is time to ask for help when home management is not enough and when the severity and duration of the anxiety reach a point that it is greatly affecting one or more areas of your child's life.

What kind of help is available?

- School based services:
 - Social Worker/Psychologist/Special Education
 - Community Resources:
 - Anxiety disorder clinics: Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto East General Hospital
 - Children's Mental health centres: Hincks-Dellcrest, Aisling Discoveries

What types of interventions are most helpful?

- a combination of empathic support and building coping strategies works best
 - Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
 - Mindfulness-based practices
 - Group therapy specific to types of anxiety, eg. social anxiety groups
 - Family Therapy
 - Psychopharmacology

- **Question: Will my child's anxiety go away naturally or does he/she need treatment?**
- **Question: I'm an anxious person also. Is it possible that I gave this anxiety to my child?**
- **Question: What is the difference between cognitive-behavioral treatment and other kinds of treatment for anxiety?**

REFERENCES

- www.aboutkidshealth.ca
- www2.nami.org
- www.kidsmentalhealth.ca
- www.anxietybc.com/parent
- Katharina Manassis, ***Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child***

Resources

- ***Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child*** by Katharina Manassis
- ***Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents*** by Ronald Rapee, Ann Wignall, Susan Spence
- ***If Your Adolescent Has an Anxiety Disorder: An Essential Resource for Parents*** by Edna B. Foa, Linda Wasmer Andrews

Additional on-line Resource:

<http://www.childmind.org/en/anxiety/home/>