
ANXIETY AND ANXIETY DISORDERS IN CHILDREN: INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

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Anxiety is a common experience to all of us on an almost daily basis. Often, we use terms like *jittery*, *high strung*, and *uptight* to describe anxious feelings. Feeling anxious is normal and can range from very low levels to such high levels that social, personal, and academic performance is affected. At moderate levels, anxiety can be helpful because it raises our alertness to danger or signals that we need to take some action. Anxiety can arise from real or imagined circumstances. For example, a student may become anxious about taking a test (real) or be overly concerned that he or she will say the wrong thing and be ridiculed (imagined). Because anxiety results from thinking about real or imagined events, almost any situation can set the stage for it to occur.

DEFINITION

There are many definitions of anxiety, but a useful one is *apprehension or excessive fear about real or imagined circumstances*. The central characteristic of anxiety is worry, which is excessive concern about situations with uncertain outcomes. Excessive worry is unproductive, because it may interfere with the ability to take action to solve a problem. Symptoms of anxiety may be reflected in thinking, behavior, or physical reactions.

DEVELOPMENTAL PATTERN

Anxiety is a normal developmental pattern that is exhibited differently as children grow older. All of us experience anxiety at some time and cope with it well, for the most part. Some people are anxious about specific things, such as speaking in public, but are able to do well in other activities, such as social interactions. Other people may have such high levels of anxiety that their overall ability to function is impaired. In these situations, counseling or other services may be needed.

Infancy and preschool. Typically, anxiety is first shown at about 7–9 months, when infants demonstrate *stranger anxiety* and become upset in the presence of unfamiliar people. Prior to that time, most babies do not show undue distress about being around strangers. When stranger anxiety emerges, it signals the beginning of a period of cognitive development when children begin to discriminate among people. A second developmental milestone occurs at about 12–18 months, when toddlers demonstrate *separation anxiety*. They become upset when parents leave for a short time, such as going out to dinner. The child may cry, plead for them not to leave, and try to prevent their departure. Although distressing, this normal behavior is a cue that the child is able to distinguish parents from other adults and is aware of the possibility they may not return. Ordinarily, this separation anxiety is resolved by age 2, and the child shows increasing ability to separate from parents. Both of these developmental periods are important and are indicators that cognitive development is progressing as expected.

School age. At preschool and early childhood levels, children tend to be limited in their ability to anticipate future events, but by middle childhood and adolescence these reasoning skills are usually well developed. There tends to be a gradual change from global, undifferentiated, and externalized fears to more abstract and internalized worry. Up to about age 8 children tend to become anxious about specific,

When Should I Seek Professional Help?

Answering the following questions may be helpful in deciding if your child needs professional help:

- Is the anxiety typical for a child this age?
- Is the anxiety shown in specific situations or is it more pervasive?
- Is the problem long term or is it recent?
- What events may be contributing to the problems?
- How are personal, social, and academic development affected?

If the anxiety is atypical for the child's age, is long standing, does not seem to be improving, and is causing significant problems, then it is advisable to talk with a professional, such as the school psychologist or counselor, who might recommend a referral to a community mental health professional. Individual counseling, or even group or family counseling, may be used to help the child deal with school, family, or personal issues that are related to the anxiety. In some cases, a physician may recommend medication. Although medication for childhood disorders is not well researched and side effects must be monitored, this treatment may be helpful when combined with counseling approaches.

How Can I Help My Child at Home?

Although professional intervention may be necessary, the following list may be helpful to parents in working with the child at home:

- Be consistent in how you handle problems and administer discipline.
- Remember that anxiety is not willful misbehavior, but reflects an inability to control it. Therefore, be patient and be prepared to listen. Being overly critical, disparaging, impatient, or cynical likely will only make the problem worse.
- Maintain realistic, attainable goals and expectations for your child. Do not communicate that perfection is expected or acceptable. Often, anxious children try to please adults, and will try to be perfect if they believe it is expected of them.
- Maintain a consistent, but flexible, routine for homework, chores, and activities.
- Accept mistakes as a normal part of growing up, and that no one is expected to do everything equally well. Praise and reinforce effort, even if success is less than expected. There is nothing wrong with reinforcing and recognizing success, as long as it does not create unrealistic expectations and result in unreasonable standards.
- If your child is worried about an upcoming event, such as giving a speech in class, practice it often so that confidence increases and discomfort decreases. It is not realistic to expect that all

anxiety will be removed; rather, the goal should be to get the anxiety to a level that is manageable.

- Teach your child simple strategies to help with anxiety, such as organizing materials and time, developing small scripts of what to do and say, either externally or internally, when anxiety increases, and learning how to relax under stressful conditions. Practicing things such as making speeches until a comfort level is achieved can be a useful anxiety-reducing activity.
- Listen to and talk with your child on a regular basis and avoid being critical. Being critical may increase pressure to be perfect, which may be contributing to the problem in the first place. Do not treat emotions, questions, and statements about feeling anxious as silly or unimportant. They may not seem important to you but are real to your child. Take all discussion seriously, and avoid giving too much advice and instead be there to help and offer assistance as requested. You may find that reasoning about the problem does not work. At times, children may realize that their anxiety does not make sense, but are unable to do anything about it without help.
- Do not assume that your child is being difficult or that the problem will go away. Seek help if the problem persists and continues to interfere with daily activities.

What Are the Risks of Untreated Anxiety?

Untreated anxiety can lead to depression and other problems that can persist into adulthood. However, anxiety problems *can* be treated effectively, especially if detected early. Although it is neither realistic nor advisable to try to completely eliminate all anxiety, the overall goal of intervention should be to return your child to a typical level of functioning.

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Anxiety Disorders Association of America—www.aada.org
National Mental Health Association—www.nmha.org

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Cognitive	Behavioral	Physical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentration difficulties • Overreaction and catastrophizing relatively minor events • Memory problems • Worry • Irritability • Perfectionism • Thinking rigidity • Hyper vigilant • Fear of losing control • Fear of failure • Difficulties with problem solving and academic performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shyness • Withdrawal • Frequently asking questions • Frequent need for reassurance • Needs for sameness • Avoidant • Rapid speech • Excessive talking • Restlessness, fidgety • Habit behaviors, such as hair pulling or twirling • Impulsiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trembling or shaking • Increased heart rate • Excessive perspiration • Shortness of breath • Dizziness • Chest pain or discomfort • Flushing of the skin • Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea • Muscle tension • Sleep problems