

## **Anxiety in Children and Youth**

By Ian Manion

For the RBC Children's Mental Health Project

Feeling stressed, worried, and fearful of certain things or situations is quite common and normal. Some nervousness actually can motivate you to be prepared for a test at school or to practice for a sport or other activity. Being afraid in threatening situations can also help you to be cautious and make good choices in challenging situations. Almost all people experience anxiety at one time or another.

Fears and worries can be classified as an anxiety disorder when the symptoms are more severe and interfere day-to-day life. At any given time, about six percent of children have an anxiety disorder that is bad enough to require treatment. Children and youth can experience different kinds of anxiety disorders and have more than one at the same time.

Anxiety disorders can develop for complex set of reasons. Some of the anxiety disorders that begin in childhood can persist throughout life if no treatment is given. If the anxiety becomes bad enough to interfere with the school and social activities usual for their age and stage of development, then professional advice should be sought.

### **Things to look for:**

- **Physical symptoms** - stomach cramps, headaches, vomiting and diarrhea, feeling faint, tingling in their hands or face, weak or rubbery knees, and light-headedness.
- **Emotional symptoms** -anger, sadness, frustration, hopelessness and embarrassment, which is out of proportion to the situation; persistent worrying about things such as hours, days and even weeks ahead of time.
- **Behavioural symptoms** - sleep difficulties and nightmares, avoiding friends, activities or situations altogether.

The exact combination of symptoms varies significantly from one child to another and can change over time for any given person. Although some children show these symptoms very early on, others show a marked change in behaviour at home, in public or at school that can alert others that a problem exists.

The good thing about anxiety disorders is that we know how to treat them successfully in most children and adolescents. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is considered to be the treatment of choice in children over the age of six, and for adolescents. If the child or adolescent does not respond completely to CBT, then medications can be added.

### **Sources:**

- I. ementalhealth.ca at the Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO – [www.ementalhealth.ca](http://www.ementalhealth.ca)
- II. The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario – [www.cheo.on.ca/en/anxiety](http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/anxiety)
- III. The Centre of Knowledge on Healthy Child Development at the Offord Centre for Child Studies – [www.knowledge.offordcentre.com](http://www.knowledge.offordcentre.com)