

Anxiety in Children and Youth

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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 to make good choices in challenging or dangerous situations. Almost all people experience anxiety at one time or another. Most people experience anxiety as normal worries or fears that are related to temporary events, like public speaking.

Fears and worries can be classified as an anxiety disorders when the symptoms are more severe and interfere with the child or youth's day-to-day life. At any given time, about 6% of children or youth in the general public 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 are often found in people with depression. In youth, substance use can often accompany an anxiety disorder as the young person tries to find some relief from their symptoms.

Causes:

Anxiety disorders can develop for complex set of reasons. Children and youth are particularly prone to anxiety disorders if they have a parent with depression or anxiety. This is partly because there may be a genetic component to these disorders. Anxious or depressed parents have symptoms of their own that can actually contribute to their child's anxiety or even role model poor ways of coping (e.g., avoidance). Parents who share symptoms with their children can also be in a position to identify their child's anxiety to either model healthy coping and/or to get the right kind of help early on. A traumatic event can also trigger significant problems with anxiety. 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). There may be repeated requests for reassurance or unnecessary apologizing to others.

The exact combination of symptoms varies significantly from one child or youth to another and can change over time for any given person. You are really looking for things that interfere with the child or youth's day-to-day life. Although some child and youth show these symptoms from very early on in life, other show a marked change in behaviour at home, in public or at school that can alert others that a problem exists.

What parents can do:

- Help your child to maintain good physical health and regular routines (balanced diet, good sleeping habits, fitness through exercise, time for leisure and relaxation).

- Be patient and reassuring. Be positive about their ability to handle the anxiety-provoking situation. Keep the lines of communication open.
- Reward your child's coping behaviour and praise successes, even partial successes; the focus should be on your child's efforts in confronting and managing their worries.
- Manage your own anxieties and don't allow your worries in the situation to influence your child. Be a model for healthy coping.
- Give your child opportunities to work through their fear by reinforcing supported exposure to the thing that worries them and allowing small victories along the way.
- Teach your child positive "self-talk".
- Check for external sources of stress and worry that need to be addressed (e.g., bullying at school, open conflict between their parents).

Treatment

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 6, and for adolescents. If the child or adolescent does not respond completely to CBT, then medications can be added.

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Sources:

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- II. The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario – 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