

Coping With Anxiety: Ways Parent's Can Support Their Children

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What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety is generally caused by excessive worry or anticipation about a stressor
- Having extreme fear about a specific thing or situation
- Being worried about the future
- Having repeated episodes of sudden, unexpected, intense fear that come with symptoms like heart pounding, having trouble breathing, or feeling dizzy, shaky, or sweaty

Different Types of Anxiety

- **Social Anxiety** → peer relationships, scared to be embarrassed, worried about being rejected
- **Test Anxiety** → uneasiness or nervousness felt before, during, or after a test that interferes with performance
- **Separation Anxiety** → a child becomes fearful and nervous when away from home or separated from a loved one
- **Generalized Anxiety** → excessive and uncontrollable worry about a number of events or activities

Environmental Factors that Impact Children's Anxiety and Stress

- Divorce/Family Instability
- Grief/Loss
- Financial Instability/Homelessness
- Trauma
- Deployment/Separation

Understanding Anxiety

- All humans experience fears at different points in their lives. This is a normal part of development
- Anxiety is an expected normal and transient response to stress
- Anxiety can be mild and short lived or pervasive and intense, causing a great deal of distress and placing very real restrictions on life
- A moderate amount of anxiety helps us to do well. Too much or too little anxiety keeps our performance lower
- Anxiety is part of our body's **fight or flight response** to danger

KIDS HAVE A LOT ON THEIR PLATES THESE DAYS! What do kids have to worry about?!

- Children are experiencing far more stress and anxiety than any previous generation
- Families face many different challenges & stressors
- Social media pressures
- School problems
- Kids are especially vulnerable to these stressors since they have less control over their lives
- Covid related concerns such as losing a loved one

Childhood Anxiety

- Affects 1 in 8 children
- Children who suffer from anxiety are at higher risk to perform poorly in school and miss out on important social experiences if they don't receive support
- Anxiety disorders often co-occur with depression and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Common Triggers

- **Genetics:** Just like your child can inherit your eyes or your complexion, anxiety can also be transmitted from parent to child
- **Academic/achievement pressure:** Sometimes pressure is self-prescribed; sometimes kids feel pressured by the adults in their lives
- **Learned anxiety:** Children can learn anxious responses from the people in their homes. A perfectionist parent, for example, might unintentionally send the message that everything needs to be perfect
- **Bullying/social issues:** Kids who experience chronic bullying can develop symptoms of anxiety. This includes cyberbullying, which is reaching younger and younger children
- **Transitions:** New homes, new schools and even new teachers can trigger an anxious child
- **Loss:** Divorce, death of a loved one or death of a pet can result in symptoms of anxiety
- **Violence or abuse:** Kids who experience child abuse or witness domestic violence or other acts of violence in the home can experience anxiety disorders

Signs of Anxiety

- **Psychosomatic complaints:** Kids don't usually come home from school saying, "I felt really anxious at school today," but they do say things like, "I have a terrible stomachache; I can't go back to school tomorrow." Frequent stomachaches, headaches and unexplained muscle aches and pains can all be symptoms of anxiety. It's also important to watch for complaints of chest pain, racing heart, difficulty breathing, dizziness and difficulty swallowing
- **Anger and irritability:** Most kids have meltdowns at times when they feel exhausted and overwhelmed. Frequent meltdowns that are lengthy and fueled by anger and irritability, on the other hand, are worth taking a second look. Child anxiety often looks like intense anger and a complete lack of emotional regulation
- **Sadness:** Anxious kids can appear clingy, overwhelmed and sad. They are likely to burst into tears without explanation
- **Isolation and avoidance:** Anxious children often engage in social isolation. They avoid additional social interaction beyond school, choosing the safety and comfort of home to recover. They are also master procrastinators and tend to avoid challenges
- **Fatigue:** Coping with anxiety can be exhausting. Chronic fatigue in a previously active child can be a sign of anxiety
- **Poor concentration:** Anxiety can make it difficult to focus
- **School refusal:** School can feel like an exercise in survival for kids with anxiety, and school refusal is often the first red flag parents and educators notice
- **Frequent questions:** Anxious kids tend to be concerned with personal safety and the safety of family and friends. They ask the same questions repeatedly and seek validation from adults often

Symptoms of Anxiety In Children

- Tense muscles
- Sweating
- Heart pounding
- Difficulty sitting still
- Consistent trouble with falling asleep and/or staying asleep; nightmares
- Serious distress and panic when separated from parent or caregiver (going to school, day care or other places)
- School refusal
- Losing interest in normal activities
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling irritable and upset
- Outbursts of anger
- Feelings fatigued or out of energy to cope
- Changes in school performance and poor grades
- Aggressive behavior and/or not obeying adults in charge
- Excessive worry and needing to do things perfectly

Examples of Ways Anxiety Can Manifest

- A 7-year-old is the perfect student but destroys his bedroom and screams at his siblings after school
- A 10-year-old snaps at her mother constantly, criticizing just about everything she does
- An 8-year-old cries every morning before school and clings to his parents each time they attempt to drop him off at school, sports events or birthday parties
- A 12-year-old experiences headaches that make it difficult to get out the door on time
- A 6-year-old can't fall asleep at night.
- Though all of these behaviors appear unrelated and present different challenges, they have one common thread: **anxiety**

Tips for Managing Anxiety

- When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning parents can fall into a negative cycle and, not wanting a child to suffer, actually exacerbate the youngster's anxiety
- The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.
- None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety isn't to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It's to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they're anxious.

Tips for Managing Anxiety

- Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious
- Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset and starts to cry, and the parents whisk them out of there, or remove the thing they are afraid of, it's a learned coping mechanism, and that cycle has the potential to repeat itself

Tips for Managing Anxiety

- Express positive but realistic expectations
- You can't promise a child that their fears are unrealistic, that they won't fail a test, that they'll have fun ice skating, or that another child won't laugh at them during show & tell. But you can express confidence that it will be okay, they will be able to manage it, and that, as they face their fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives children confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you're not going to ask them to do something they can't handle.
- Respect your child's feelings, but don't empower them
- It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. If a child is terrified about going to the doctor because they are due for a shot, you don't want to belittle their fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic and encourage them to face their fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this"
- Don't ask leading questions
- Encourage your child to talk about their feelings, but try not to ask leading questions such as "Are you anxious about the big test? Are you worried about the science fair?" To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open ended questions: "How are you feeling about the science fair?"

Tips for Managing Anxiety

- Encourage the child to tolerate their anxiety
- Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what they want or need to do
- Think things through with the child.
- Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true, how would they handle it? A child who's anxious about separating from her parents might worry about what would happen if they didn't come to pick her up. So we would talk about that
- Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety
- There are multiple ways you can help kids handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Kids are perceptive, and they're going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you can't handle the stress or the anxiety.

Anxiety Management

- Have your child get moving! Do moderate daily exercise
- Have your child eat at a well-balanced diet
- Limit sugar intake
- Have your child get at least 7 hours of sleep at night
- Practice deep breathing with your child
- Make time for relaxation: listening to music, meditation or guided imagery, yoga, and reading
- Positive self-talk statements

Managing Covid 19 Anxiety

- Be a role model. Children will react to and follow your reactions. They learn from your example.
- Be aware of how you talk about COVID-19. Your discussion about COVID-19 can increase or decrease your child's fear.
- Parents/guardians should monitor television, internet, and social media viewing, both for themselves and their children. Watching continual updates on COVID-19 may increase fear and anxiety.
- Developmentally inappropriate information, or information designed for adults, can also cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children.
- Offer lots of love and affection.

When To Seek Help

- When children experience symptoms of anxiety that interfere with their daily life (symptoms occur more often than not during at least a two-week period), it's important to seek professional help.
- A pediatrician is a good first stop to rule out or diagnose possible medical issues and to refer a licensed mental health practitioner who specializes in working with children. Cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavioral therapy can be very effective treatment options for children with anxiety.

What happens if Childhood Anxiety is Left Untreated?

- Feelings of being ashamed, afraid, and alone are not uncommon. Research has shown that if left untreated, children with anxiety disorders are at higher risk to perform poorly in school, miss out on important social experiences, and engage in substance abuse.

Coping Thoughts to Teach Children

- I'm safe
- I can do this!
- I've done it before, I can do it again!

Resources

Worry Wise Kids- <http://www.worrywisekids.org>

All about Anxiety- <https://childmind.org/topics/anxiety/>

Sesame Street: Common and Colbie Caillat -"Belly Breathe" with Elmo (on Youtube)

Kid's Relaxation: Progressive Muscle Relaxation exercises-
<http://kidsrelaxation.com/?cat=21>

Questions

