

Anxiety in Children - What we should know as parents?



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FACT SHEET - INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

Anxiety is a word that health professionals use when a child is fearful or distressed and the distress keeps going on for a long time. In some children this fear or distress occurs in particular situations such as the playground or just prior to sleep. Other children get anxious or worried that something bad might happen in almost any situation from starting school to being afraid of the dark. However, these can also be normal reactions. As parents, we should be concerned when our child's fear or worry is bigger or stronger than we would expect for the situation.

Three things are essential in working out how serious our children's worries are:

1 - Does our child have the sort of worries that other children have at the same age? ie. is it normal for their stage of growth?

It is normal for little children under three to have strong reactions when separated from parents. During early school years many children develop fears of insects, strangers or ghosts. Teenage children can become shy and socially reserved. If our children's fears are too strong for what is

happening or last too long to be just a passing phase, we should begin to think that they may be suffering from an anxiety problem. An anxiety disorder is not just a normal reaction but an illness. For example, a teenager who always does well at school becomes totally preoccupied with a fear of failing school.

2 - Can our children explain how they feel? Children are at a loss usually to explain anxiety. They find it hard to talk about their fear or distress. This is a little like children who are in pain. Adults can often point to their pain and explain what is wrong. Children in pain frequently have difficulty identifying where they have the pain and what sort of pain it is. As parents, it is our responsibility to detect changes in our child's routine and in the way they handle their feelings. For example, is our daughter withdrawing more? Is our son sleeping less? Is our pre-schooler clinging more? Is our primary school-aged daughter missing a lot of school? Has our adolescent son started worrying just a bit too much?

3 - How long does it last? Normal worries don't last long in childhood. They fade quickly. However if our children's

fears or worries stay around for more than three weeks we too should begin to get worried. If they stay around for three months (a whole school term), we need to ask for professional help.

How do we find out if there's a real problem with our child?

Our children mix and mingle with other children and adults in many situations every day. Talking with the key people across these different settings is often helpful. Some of these people may have noticed a change in our child's behaviour or they may be able to explain the cause of the behaviour. Sometimes when we know the cause we just have to be a little more understanding and give our child time and space to adjust. Other times we have extra reasons to seek help.

How to tell the difference between normal worries and an anxiety that needs treatment?

Worries and fears are very common in both children and adults. We have to think carefully about whether we are making 'mountains out of molehills' or missing a very real problem which could be putting obstacles in the way of our child's progress. If we as parents treat every worry in a child as a serious problem, it will do more harm than good. Our children will become worried that the world is a very dangerous place.

Not all worries and fears need professional help. Some fear reactions are normal for the child's age and may even show that they are maturing.

Apply the following yardsticks to know whether your child's reactions are out of the normal range.

1 - It won't go away

Let's say that our child was bullied in the play ground and that for some time after she was very anxious and frightened every time other children were around and did

not want to go to school. A meeting with the school leads to the bullying stopping. However, the fears go on. Even when she goes to a friendly playgroup she continues to have panic or fear reactions.

If she continues to have anxiety attacks with fear and panic after the initial event has been resolved for more than 3 months, it needs further attention.

2 - The worries have grown worse with time

We need to look into what is happening if the initial anxiety reaction has given way to a whole lot of new worries and physical symptoms such as vomiting, tummy ache, headache etc. Again if our son had a bad fall from the swing and was fearful to try it again and gradually starts avoiding the park where the swings are, then begins avoiding going out in the street and then finally avoids other children, refusing to leave home.

3 - It shows in other parts of his life

If our children are not able to do the things they used to do before because of fear or anxiety, whatever the setting, we should be concerned. If we are feeling that our children's anxious behaviour or fearful reactions interfere with their normal lives and progress in growing up we should be asking for help.

What are the signs that our children are moving from normal worries to anxiety?

Anxiety varies from child to child. Some children are simply anxious of one thing, like ghosts, and others worry about many things. Almost all children show the following features when they get anxious.

1- Anxious children will worry a lot about some danger or threat. For example, they worry about getting hurt, being laughed at, or someone close to them falling ill.

2 - When our children become anxious, their breathing becomes faster; there may be sweating, feelings of nausea, diarrhoea, pain in different parts of the body such as

headache and generally feeling uncomfortable and miserable.

3 - When children get anxious they also get nervous. They may cry, cling, or fidget.

4 - Anxious children usually tend to avoid the things that they fear. For example, not going to the playground for fear of meeting new children, refusing to go to parties for fear of separating from parents. Avoidance is one of the most important signs of being anxious.

How can we help our children when they are anxious?

Anxious children often view the world as a dangerous place. Sometimes this is because they interpret our love, control and protection as a sign that "there must be something nasty out there." At other times they can see that we are anxious and it makes them anxious even when they do not know why. There are times when the world around proves not to be safe. However, living in constant fear that everything can go wrong will eventually paralyse both us and our children and makes it impossible to enjoy the good things that are happening. To help our children when their worries are interfering with daily life, we can begin by listening without trying to provide answers or reassuring them that their worries are not true. We try to encourage them gently but firmly not to avoid situations that frighten them. However, sometimes all of these things do not work and it is time to ask for help outside the family. Initially this might be a wise and trusted friend, a mulla, pastor or priest. But if the problem persists it is best to consult with professionals who can help anxious children. These are by and large general practitioners, paediatricians, counsellors in school, psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists from different disciplines. They use a variety of helpful ways including relaxation, realistic thinking, improving self esteem, boosting confidence,

assertiveness training and so on and so forth to treat anxiety. Sometimes when all these do not work and the worries are severe, medication can also be used.

Are there different ways of getting worried in different cultures?

Yes. What one culture sees as an anxiety reaction, another culture may view as normal behaviour. For example, not looking at people while talking is normal in Navajo Indians and is not seen as a sign of being anxious while around others. Talking softly, particularly by women and children is normal in some cultures and is not considered a sign of fear or uneasiness. There can be differences of opinion or disagreement between school and parents, or doctors and parents as to whether the child's fears are normal or not. Under these circumstances it would be useful to try and understand a child compared to other children their age from the same cultural group, background and family values. It can be unhelpful and confusing to try to make sense of every child's behaviour in the same way as if 'one size fits all'.

As a parent we try to do what is best for our children. If we are concerned about particular behaviours in our children it is worthwhile to look into it a little further. On the other hand, if we feel comfortable about the behaviours that others are concerned about in our children, so long as it does not create obstacles in their lives or prolonged distress it is unlikely to be serious.

Remember that worries and fears are normal in children. But when our children do show abnormal patterns or persistence of worries and fears, good effective treatments are available and we should not let our children go on suffering unnecessarily.