

Anxiety in children

What we should know as parents?

What is anxiety?

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 before going to sleep. Other children get anxious or worried that something bad might happen in any situation from starting school to being afraid of the dark. These can be normal reactions. As parents, we should be concerned when our children's fears or worries are bigger or stronger than we would expect for the situation.

Three things are necessary to work out how serious our children's worries are:

1. Do our children have the sort of worries that other children have?

It is normal for 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 they may be suffering from an anxiety problem. An anxiety disorder is not just a normal reaction but an illness. For example, if a teenager who always does well at school becomes fearful about failing in schoolwork, then the teenager may have developed an anxiety problem.

2. Can our children explain how they feel?

Children can't usually explain anxiety. They find it hard to talk about their fears or distress. As parents, it is our responsibility to be aware of changes in our children's habits 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 teenage son started worrying too much?

3. How long does it last?

Normal worries don't last long in childhood. They disappear quickly. However, if our children's fears or worries stay around for more than three weeks, we should begin to get worried. If they stay around for three months we need to ask for professional help.

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

Our children mix with other children and adults in many situations every day. Some of these people may have noticed a change in our children'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 understanding and give our children time to adjust.



How can we 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 a problem bigger than it is or missing a very real problem, which could be blocking our children's progress. If we as parents treat every worry in our children's lives as a serious problem, it may do more harm than good. Our children may become worried that our world is a very dangerous place. Not all worries and fears need professional help. Some fears are normal for a child's age and may even show that they are maturing.

Apply the following rules to know whether our children are anxious:

- 1. It won't go away:** Let us say that our children are bullied in the playground and that for some time after being bullied they were very anxious and frightened every time other children were around. A meeting with the school teacher leads to the bullying stopping. However, our children's fears go on. Even when they go to a friendly playground they continue to panic. If their attacks continue after the bullying stops, they should be seen by a professional to help them overcome their fears
- 2. The worries have grown worse with time:** We need to look into what is happening if the initial anxiety reaction has turned into new worries, especially if there are physical symptoms such as vomiting, stomach aches and headaches.
- 3. It shows in other parts of their life:** If our children are not able to do the things they used to do before because of fear or anxiety, we should be concerned. If we are feeling that their 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 anxious?

- 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 getting sick.
- When our children become anxious, their breathing becomes faster; there may be sweating, nausea, diarrhea, headaches and feeling miserable.
- When children get anxious they also get nervous. They may cry, cling, or fidget.
- Anxious children usually avoid the things that they fear; for example, not going to the playground for fear of meeting new children or refusing to go to parties for fear of separating from parents.

How can we help our children when they are anxious?

To help our children when their worries are interfering with daily life, we can begin by listening without trying to give answers or we can reassure 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. This might be a wise and trusted friend or priest. But if the problem persists it is best to talk to professionals who can help anxious children. These professionals can be general practitioners, pediatricians, counsellors in school, psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists. They help children overcome their anxiety by using such helpful methods as relaxation, improving self-esteem and improving confidence. Sometimes, if none of these methods work well and the worries are severe, medication can also be used.



Are there different ways of getting worried in different cultures?

Yes. What is seen as anxiety in one culture, may be seen as normal behaviour by people from another culture. For example, talking softly, particularly by women and children, is normal in some cultures and is not considered a sign of fear or worry.

As parents we try to do what is best for our children. If we are concerned about particular behaviours in our children it is important 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 the behaviour does not create problems in their lives it is unlikely to be serious.

Remember that worries and fears are normal in children. But when our children show persistent worries and fears, good effective treatments are available and we should not let our children suffer unnecessarily.

What can we do when our children need help and we don't have the answers?

- Call the Transcultural Mental Health Centre for advice in your language
- Call the Kids Help Line for advice and information
- Talk to the children's school counsellor
- Call the local community health centre
- Talk to a general practitioner for advice about local professionals such as child psychologists or pediatricians.

Transcultural Mental Health Centre

Tel: (02) 9840 3767 (during business hours)

Freecall for rural and remote areas of NSW: 1800 64 8911

Kids Help Line

Tel: 24hr 1800 55 1800

Printed August 2002



the
children's
hospital at Westmead

Transcultural Mental
Health Centre



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