

FAMILIES IN FOCUS

Parenting Pointers

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Childhood Anxiety

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety can be a normal reaction to a tense situation or stress, that causes feelings of worry, fear, uneasiness or apprehension. In general, anxiety can help one cope. However, when anxiety becomes an excessive, irrational fear of everyday situations, it can become a disabling disorder (National Institute of Mental Health).

Fears and worries can be common and developmentally appropriate. For example, infants tend to develop a fear of strangers. Toddlers may fear darkness and separation from caregivers. School-age children tend to worry about injury, death, and natural disasters. Older children may worry about school performance, social status and health issues (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry).

At times, worries can be functional. For instance, if children did not worry about doing well, perhaps they would not learn or perform as effectively. Mild worry can serve as a motivator, encouraging children to prepare and work hard. A certain degree of worry can also serve as protection for children. Fears of situations help them make good choices that keep them safe.

However, worries that persist, despite parents' efforts to provide reassurance, may lead to the development of an anxiety disorder, which may impair a child's daily functioning.

In understanding anxiety, it is important to consider the relationship between an event, beliefs or thoughts about this event, and feelings. It's very easy to assume that an event determines one's feelings. However, it is one's beliefs, or what he/she tells himself about the event that causes the feelings.

Also, it important to understand that anxious individuals believe that bad things are very likely to happen to them. For example if a parent is late coming home, an anxious child will



tell himself/herself that the parent has definitely been in a car accident. While yes, this is a possibility, the reality is probably unlikely. Additionally, anxious individuals perceive the consequences of these feared events as catastrophic or intolerable. For example, a child who is afraid of making mistakes views mistakes as the "end of the world" and perceives something terrible and unbearable happening as a result of his/her mistake.

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY?

At this time, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry reports that there is no single cause of anxiety disorders. "The development of anxiety disorders typically results from an interaction between certain biological and environmental factors that are unique to each individual. Genetics play an important role in determining who will develop an anxiety disorder, as does a child's temperament, or innate personality style." Children who are quiet and shy are more likely to experience anxiety.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CHILDHOOD ANXIETY

Parents are usually the first to recognize their child's emotional or behavioral challenges. As an initial step, it's important for parents to talk with their child about his/her feelings and worries. A child with anxiety may talk about his/her worry, but typically, he/she does not realize the excessiveness or irrationality of the concern. An anxious child may also complain of physical ailments such as headaches or stomachaches.

It is critical for parents to understand that it is not parents' sole responsibility to "fix" their child's anxiety. It's okay for parents to seek support. Knowing when to seek professional help, as well as taking the first step to get help, can be a difficult decision for parents.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry encourages parents to seek support if their child exhibits the following:



marked decline in school performance; poor grades despite strong effort; increased activity level; refusal to attend school, go to sleep, or participate in activities; persistent disobedience, aggression, or unexplained temper tantrums. Additionally, the Anxiety Disorders Association of America encourages parents to be vigilant of changes in a child's eating habits, relationships with family and friends, speech and language and other developmental milestones, as well as the appearance of regressive behaviors.



SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

When seeking help, parents may want to start by consulting the child's pediatrician, since he/she is likely to be familiar with the child and someone the family trusts. In seeking treatment, consider finding a specialist, someone who is trained to treat anxiety in children, and someone with whom the family is comfortable working.

There is no single treatment for anxiety. Clinicians may formulate a specific plan for each child and family. Psychotherapy tends to be the "first line" treatment for mild anxiety. If a child's symptoms are severe, or if a child is not responding to therapy and behavioral approaches, the possibility of adding medication may be introduced and discussed with parents (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry).

CHILDHOOD ANXIETY IS A FAMILY SITUATION

Successful treatment depends on the investment of time and energy of all family members. Parents must take an active role in a child's treatment. Parents and the child together need to share the responsibility of practicing strategies that are learned during sessions.



A FEW ADDITIONAL IDEAS...

The following are some suggestions to help your child learn to relax and cope with his/her worries: (these ideas are a starting point, but not intended in lieu of treatment if you feel your child is in need of professional support).

- ☉ **Deep breathing**– Breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. Blow away your worries. Consider practicing deep breathing with bubbles. This adds a visual component for children and bubbles have a "magical ability" to create smiles!
- ☉ **Muscle relaxation**– Tighten up muscle groups and



slowly release them...head to toe. Pretend you are sponge soaking up water, and then squeezing it out!

- ☉ **Journal**– Drawing or writing about feelings, thoughts, or worries helps children get their "heavy" feelings out of them and on to the paper. Journaling may also help parents "tune in" to their child's worries and initiate helpful conversations.
- ☉ **Get active or exercise!** Moving around helps children expend their "heavy" feelings. Practice "shaking out" worries.
- ☉ **Create a family worry box**- Have family members write down their worries and "lock them away" in the worry box. At the end of the week, have a family meeting to review the worries and how they were handled. Focus on how your child coped with his/her worries.
- ☉ **Play "Possibilities"**- This game can teach children to challenge their worries. When a child voices a worry, respond by saying, "Yes, that's one possibility." Talk about it and then ask, "Can you think of another possibility?" Provide the child with an example of another possibility. Together brainstorm as many possibilities as you can. Laugh, have fun, and create some silly possibilities too!
- ☉ **Practice talking back to worries**– Practice saying (aloud first, then silently) things like "I don't believe you!", "Leave me alone!", or "Get outta here!" It is hoped that children will be able to access these thoughts when they are being troubled by worries.



COUNSELOR HIGHLIGHTS

During January the Elementary Counselors will be continuing with the first grade friendship lesson series and beginning the third grade unit on human diversity, "We are the Same and Different."

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

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