

Patient and Family Education

Anxiety Disorders: What Parents Need to Know

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Anxiety is a part of normal development. Infants can be afraid of strangers, preschoolers fearful of the dark and monsters, and younger school-aged children worry about storms. Older school-aged children may worry about academics and social situations.

When is anxiety not normal?

When worries get in the way of normal everyday activities much of the time, they may be signs of an anxiety disorder. Here are some examples:

- A preschool child cannot fall asleep because of fears of monsters. The usual soothing things don't work.
- A young child is so afraid of lightening or thunder that she refuses to leave the house, or she has to check the sky all the time.
- A school-age child gets physically ill on many school days, but feels much better as soon as he gets to stay home.

There are many different kinds of anxiety disorders. Sometimes it is obvious that the child is afraid. Sometimes the child may act in ways that seem “bad” or “mad,” or that look like a medical illness. Doctors and psychologists are trained to spot these forms of anxiety disorder.

Facts about anxiety disorders:

- Anxiety disorders are common. They affect 8-12% of children and adolescents – about one in 10.
- 70% of adults with anxiety disorders report that their symptoms began in childhood.
- The more severe childhood anxiety is, the more likely it is to persist.
- Children who have anxiety disorders often also have another mental health or behavior disorder like ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, depression, learning disorders, autism spectrum disorder, or language disorders.
- An anxiety disorder may go away, but later a new anxiety disorder may take its place.
- There are effective treatments for anxiety disorders. These include counseling, cognitive behavioral therapy, and medication.

Causes of anxiety disorders:

- Transitions and losses (i.e. moving or death of a relative/parent) can trigger anxiety.
- Some children are naturally watchful and tend to become quiet when they are in a new situation or

around people they do not know. We call a style of behavior that children are born with “temperament.” Inhibited or “slow to warm up” temperament sometimes leads to anxiety problems.

- Children are more likely to develop anxiety disorders when one or both parents have anxiety. But this does not always happen.
- Children sometimes learn anxious behavior by watching their parents act in anxious ways. For example, a parent may avoid situations that make him feel anxious.
- Parenting that is over-involved, controlling, and highly critical can also lead to anxiety. Family stress, such as a lot of angry arguing, can lead to anxiety.

What to look for:

- Worrying too much
- Stomach aches, headaches
- Getting angry often, for little things. Being irritable.
- What looks like negative or oppositional behavior, when something that makes your child anxious is present (for example, in crowds)
- Anxiety or fears that keep your child from doing normal things, like going to school or enjoying friends.

Different types of anxiety:

- **Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD):** distress when faced with separation from a parent or other main emotional support people. Your child might follow you around the house and worry excessively about your safety and health.
- **Specific Phobia:** marked fear or anxiety about a specific object or situation such as animals, heights, receiving an injection, seeing blood, or flying.
- **General Anxiety Disorder (GAD):** excessive worry or anxiety. Children with GAD worry about a wide range of topics. They are often perfectionists that constantly need approval and reassurance.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder/Social Phobia:** fear associated with social settings such as classrooms, restaurants, and extracurricular activities. Children with Social Phobia may have difficulty reading or answering questions in class, beginning conversations, using public restrooms, and attending social events.
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD):** distressing thoughts, impulses, or images that intrude on a child’s awareness over and over. For example, they may have the thought that something terrible is about to happen, or that they might hurt themselves. In order to cope with these thoughts, they may engage in repetitive behaviors or mental acts; these are called compulsions.

How do doctors diagnose anxiety?

Your primary care provider will ask you and your child questions, and may give you and your child questionnaires to fill out. In addition to finding out about thoughts and feelings that go along with anxiety, the doctor will look into other things like physical symptoms (such as headaches), things that happened in your child’s past, and the family medical

This info is a general resource. It is not meant to replace your health care provider’s advice. Ask your doctor or health care team any questions. Always follow their instructions.

Learn More about Anxiety

Websites:

www.worrywisekids.org

Videos:

The 5-4-3-2-1 Method: A Grounding Exercise to Manage Anxiety

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30VMIEmA114>

You Are Not Your Thoughts

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QXmmP4psbA>>

Books for Parents and Children

Freeing Your Child From Anxiety: Powerful, practical solutions to overcome your child's fears, worries, and phobias (By: Tamar E. Chansky)

Growing up Brave: Expert strategies for helping your child overcome fear, stress, and anxiety
(By: Donna B. Pincus)

Helping Your Anxious Child: A step-by-step guide for parents 3rd Edition (2022)
(By: Ronald M Rapee, et al)

The Anxiety Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal with Anxiety and Worry
(By: Lisa Schab – read on own or with a counselor)

The Worry Workbook for Teens: Effective CBT Strategies to Break the Cycle of Chronic Worry and Anxiety (By: Jamie A. Micco)

What to Do When You Worry Too Much (By: Dawn Huebner - best for 6-12 year olds)

Wilma Jean the Worry Machine (By: Julia Cook - best for young children)

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