

Understanding Anxiety in Children



Highlights

Worries and fears are a normal part of childhood. Your child's fears will change as they grow and develop. You can support your child and help them learn skills to manage their anxieties. If your child has severe anxiety that impacts their everyday life and is not normal for their age, they may need professional support. Therapy can help children with anxiety disorders and phobias.

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What Is Childhood Anxiety?

Worry and anxiety is a normal part of life that helps people stay alert, motivated, and focused.

Many children have anxious feelings or fears that can come and go.

Having anxieties about certain things can also help your child behave safely.

Some children find the world to be more scary than others. They might find it hard to understand and manage their fears, which can affect their life.

If you are concerned about your child's anxiety, you should seek professional help.

Common Signs and Symptoms

When your child is frightened or anxious, they may:

Want to avoid certain places or situations.

Want to escape a situation quickly.

Become clingy, impulsive, or distracted.

Need regular reassurance.

Panic or have a tantrum.

Have a fast heartbeat.

Feel sick or have 'butterflies' in their stomach.

Is This Anxiety Normal?

'Normal' anxiety in your child might include:

Feeling afraid or worried about doing something new, like starting a new swimming or dance class.

Anxious feelings for things such as strangers or animals.

Learning to fear something after an unpleasant experience (e.g., fear of dogs after being bitten).

Fears that only appear in certain situations (e.g., afraid of a friend's dog but not of a lion at the zoo).

Some signs to look out for if your child is struggling with fears and anxieties include:

Lots of tantrums, sometimes for no clear reason.

Nightmares or trouble sleeping.

Aggressive behavior or trouble getting along with other children.

Regularly avoiding certain people, situations, or places.

Avoiding family, friends, or school.

Struggling to concentrate.

A change in appetite.

Headaches or stomach aches.

Age-Appropriate Fears

Your child's anxieties and fears will change as they get older. Some fears that are expected as your child grows up include:

Babies: Stranger anxiety and fear of loud noises like the vacuum cleaner.

Toddlers: Separation anxiety when you leave, which can result in distress or

tantrums.

Preschool: Fears of imaginary things and the dark.

School-age children: Fears about real-life things such as natural disasters, injury, illness, or death. They might also still have fears of imaginary things like monsters.

Types of Childhood Anxiety

There are some types of anxiety that are most common in children:

Generalised anxiety disorder: Worry about many things like school performance, tests, and popularity.

Separation anxiety: Distress when away from you, which is normal in younger children but may indicate a disorder if persistent.

Social anxiety: Extreme shyness and fear of being criticised, often leading to low self-confidence and difficulty making friends.

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD): Persistent unwanted thoughts and compulsions, such as excessive handwashing.

Phobias: Strong, irrational fears of particular things, like dogs, spiders, or the dark.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): Flashbacks, trouble sleeping, and emotional struggles after a traumatic event.

When to Seek Professional Help

Your child may need extra support if:

They are more anxious than other children their age.

Their anxiety lasts longer than 6 months.

Their anxiety interferes with daily life, such as with school, family, or friendships.

Their fear seems more intense than the cause of their fear.

If your child's fear is normal for their age, it's a good sign that it will resolve.

Treatment Options

Treatment for severe anxiety usually involves:

Cognitive behavioural therapy (talking therapy) and counselling.

These approaches help your child identify their feelings, think more realistically, and achieve their goals.

Medication may help with severe symptoms but is usually not recommended for children.

Helping Your Child Manage Anxiety

Avoid being overprotective: Encourage independence without being dismissive of their worries.

Teach coping skills: Help them develop resilience and confidence.

Listen to their worries: Validate their fears with facts and logic, instead of dismissing them.

Face fears gradually: Support them in approaching their fears in small steps, providing encouragement along the way.

Celebrate efforts: Praise them for trying new things or facing their fears.

Helping Your Child Understand Fear

Rate the fear: Help your child rate their fear from low to high, making it

easier to understand and confront.

Coping strategies: Teach your child techniques like deep breathing, imagining a calm place, or thinking positively.

Tools And Assistance

If you're unsure where to begin, talk with your child's doctor, school counsellor, or a mental health professional.

There are many online resources and community services that offer tools, workshops, and support groups for families dealing with childhood anxiety.