

# ANXIETY AND ANXIETY DISORDERS IN CHILDREN: INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

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Anxiety is a common experience to all of us on an almost daily basis. Often, we use terms like *jittery*, *high strung*, and *uptight* to describe anxious feelings. Feeling anxious is normal and can range from very low levels to such high levels that social, personal, and academic performance is affected. At moderate levels, anxiety can be helpful because it raises our alertness to danger or signals that we need to take some action. Anxiety can arise from real or imagined circumstances. For example, a student may become anxious about taking a test (real) or be overly concerned that he or she will say the wrong thing and be ridiculed (imagined). Because anxiety results from thinking about real or imagined events, almost any situation can set the stage for it to occur.

## Defining Anxiety

There are many definitions of anxiety, but a useful one is *apprehension or excessive fear about real or imagined circumstances*. The central characteristic of anxiety is worry, which is excessive concern about situations with uncertain outcomes. Excessive worry is unproductive, because it may interfere with the ability to take action to solve a problem. Symptoms of anxiety may be reflected in thinking, behavior, or physical reactions.

## Does My Child Need Professional Help?

Answering the following questions may be helpful in deciding if your child needs professional help:

- Is the anxiety typical for a child this age?
- Is the anxiety shown in specific situations or is it more pervasive?
- Is the problem long term or is it recent?
- What events may be contributing to the problems?
- How are personal, social, and academic development affected?

If the anxiety is atypical for the child's age, is long standing, does not seem to be improving, and is causing significant problems, then it is advisable to talk with a professional, such as the school psychologist or counselor, who might recommend a referral to a community mental health professional. Individual counseling, or even group or family counseling, may be used to help the child deal with school, family, or personal issues that are related to the anxiety. In some cases, a physician may recommend medication. This treatment may be helpful when combined with counseling approaches.

## How Can I Help My Child?

Although professional intervention may be necessary, the following list may be helpful to parents in working with the child at home:

- Be consistent in how you handle problems and administer discipline.
- Remember that anxiety is not willful misbehavior, but reflects an inability to control it. Therefore, be patient and be prepared to listen. Being overly critical, disparaging, impatient, or cynical likely will only make the problem worse.
- Maintain realistic, attainable goals and expectations for your child. Do not communicate that perfection is expected or acceptable. Often, anxious children try to please adults, and will try to be perfect if they believe it is expected of them.
- Maintain a consistent, but flexible, routine for homework, chores, and activities.
- Accept mistakes as a normal part of growing up, and that no one is expected to do everything equally well. Praise and reinforce effort, even if success is less than expected. There is nothing wrong with reinforcing and recognizing success, as long as it does not create unrealistic expectations and result in unreasonable standards.
- If your child is worried about an upcoming event, such as giving a speech in class, practice it often so that confidence increases and discomfort decreases. It is not realistic to expect that all anxiety will be removed; rather, the goal should be to get the anxiety to a level that is manageable.
- Teach your child simple strategies to help with anxiety, such as organizing materials and time, developing small scripts of what to do and say, either externally or internally, when anxiety increases, and learning how to relax under stressful conditions. Practicing things such as making speeches until a comfort level is achieved can be a useful anxiety-reducing activity.
- Listen to and talk with your child on a regular basis and avoid being critical. Being critical may increase pressure to be perfect, which may be contributing to the problem in the first place. Do not treat emotions, questions, and statements about feeling anxious as silly or unimportant. They may not seem important to you but are real to your child. Take all discussion seriously, and avoid giving too much advice and instead be there to help and offer assistance as requested. You may find that reasoning about the problem does not work. At times, children may realize that their anxiety does not make sense, but are unable to do anything about it without help.
- Do not assume that your child is being difficult or that the problem will go away. Seek help if the problem persists and continues to interfere with daily activities.

## Conclusion

Untreated anxiety can lead to depression and other problems that can persist into adulthood. However, anxiety problems *can* be treated effectively, especially if detected early.

## How Parents Can Help

- Be aware of your child's behaviors and emotions.
- Teach children what stress is. Acknowledge child's feelings of being overwhelmed or frustrated.
- Be available and open to talk when your child is experiencing stress. If family circumstances are contributing to the stress, be willing to answer questions honestly and calmly.
- Encourage the expression of feelings.
- Teach and model good emotional responses.
- Encourage your child to tell you if he or she feels overwhelmed or frustrated.
- Encourage healthy and diverse friendships.
- Encourage physical activity, good nutrition, and rest.
- Teach your child to problem solve.
- Keep your child aware of anticipated family changes, in an age-appropriate way. Acknowledge that change can feel uncomfortable but reassure him or her that the family will be okay.
- Do not hide the truth from your child. Children sense parents' worry and the unknown can be scarier than the truth. However, avoid unnecessary discussions in front of your child (particularly a young child) of events or circumstances that might increase his or her stress.
- Help your child have a part in decision-making when appropriate.
- Remind your child of his or her ability to get through tough times, particularly with the love and support of family and friends.
- Monitor television programs that could worry your child and pay attention to the use of computer games, movies, and the Internet.
- Use encouragement and natural consequences when poor decisions are made.
- Help your child select appropriate extracurricular activities and limit overscheduling.
- Make your child aware of the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol before experimentation begins.
- Monitor your own stress level. Take care of yourself.
- Contact your child's teacher with any concerns and make them part of the team available to assist your child.
- Seek the assistance of others, i.e., school psychologist, school counselor, physician or others if stress continues to be a concern.

## How to Help with Stress Caused at School

- Praise and reinforce effort, even if success is less than expected. There is nothing wrong with recognizing and rewarding success, as long as it does not create unrealistic expectations.
- Maintain realistic, attainable goals and expectations
- Do not communicate that perfection is expected or acceptable.
- Accept mistakes as a normal part of growing up and that no one is expected to do everything equally well.
- Teach simple strategies that can help with stress such as
  - Organizing materials and time
  - Practicing presentations and speeches
  - Learning how to relax under stressful situations (calming down, talking to self internally)



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