

About Childhood Anxiety:

Current studies show that roughly 30% of children between 3-17 years old experience symptoms that lead to a diagnosis of anxiety each year. Anxiety can have a genetic component and is often caused by a combination of familial disposition, circumstances, temperament, and experiences. Everyone worries from time to time, but when anxiety causes significant distress and impacts functioning in everyday life, it's time for empathy and action. Parents/Caregivers may notice:



- **Clinginess and separation anxiety**
- **Perfectionism and self-criticism**
- **Worry about typical daily events is frequent, persistent, and feels excessive to either parent or child**
- **Child frequently tries to avoid or delay participation in expected activities**
- **Unusual anger or irritability, unwarranted/unprovoked aggression, inability to sit still (might look like ADHD), tantrums, heightened emotions, refusal to comply with directives**
- **Regular complaints about physical issues like headaches and stomach aches (when medical issues have been ruled out)**
- **Sleep disturbance (nightmares/night terrors, unable to go to sleep, unwillingness to sleep by themselves)**
- **High level of distractibility, memory and concentration challenges**

Parent/Caregiver Tips:

- Encourage your child to talk about their worries and let them know they are not alone. They may be able to communicate their concerns through writing, drawing, role play, or texting. Sometimes conversation comes easier during a leisurely car ride or while doing an enjoyable shared activity where direct eye contact isn't required. When your child communicates their concerns or worries, stay calm and acknowledge what they say. It is important that you listen nonjudgmentally and don't make them feel silly for their feelings. Pay close attention in order to identify any triggers and watch for patterns.
- After carefully listening and expressing support, it may be appropriate to very gently challenge unrealistic or inaccurate thoughts (ex: "I just remembered that you were invited to three birthday parties in the last few weeks. I wonder why it still feels like you don't have any friends?"). The key is to stay curious and be careful not to negate their feelings.
- Reassure your kids that they can continue to let you know about how they feel and that you want to help them feel calmer and happier but that no one feels calm and happy all the time. Remind them that all feelings are acceptable.
- Ensure your child knows they are surrounded by support. Arrange a trusted go-to person that your child can speak to at times when you aren't available (ex: nurse/teacher/counselor at school, parent of friend at an activity).
- Promote your child's physical health. Hydration and nutritional needs are nonnegotiables to empower your child to be their best. Adequate sleep, outdoor time, and movement are also vital.
- Have fun! Encourage enjoyable activities and calming activities. Encourage your child to regularly participate in things they enjoy. Better yet, do those activities with them!

- Your child may also benefit from learning a few strategies they can use to gain control when they notice they are getting upset. It is easier for children to learn these strategies when they are feeling calm and relaxed, so practice during down times in order to allow kids to use strategies when things are difficult. Let your kids see you consistently utilize these strategies when you feel stressed.
 - **Breathing** – We want slow, deep breathing. Make it fun and silly if possible. (ex: Horse breathing, Bee breathing)
 - **Tense and Release** – When stressed, our muscles often tense up without us even knowing it. Practice tensing and releasing isolated parts of the body.
 - **Imaginative activities** – Kids can practice imagining they are in their favorite place and transfer their focus from the worry onto something that is relaxing and brings them a sense of calm and safety.
 - **Sensory activities** – Movement, playdough, essential oils, water, safe touch
- Practice naming and understanding the different types of feelings that people experience. Many kids struggle to identify both their own feelings and the signs other people display. This can lead to anxiety if they misperceive someone else's signal. Talk about the ways that different people experience feelings in their body (butterflies in the stomach, flushed cheeks). Understanding these things can help children to identify their own feelings and react appropriately. Remember excitement and anxiety often feel the same way and kids can misinterpret and respond unexpectedly.
- Routines and Environment: It is important to provide children with a consistent, organized, and predictable structure in life. It is much easier to be calm when you know what to expect and can mentally and emotionally prepare yourself. You can help them know what to expect by providing them with a calendar or a visual schedule of the activities coming up each day. (Give verbal warnings, post picture schedules, etc.)
- Encourage your child to face fears with support and planning. Work with the child to break down the fear into safe, manageable steps and then together make a plan to work toward conquering their fear. When the body and brain are calm, sometimes it is possible to help the child to remove the cause of the worry by getting creative and brainstorming solutions. Work together to make a plan to try different things and then debrief whether they were helpful.
- In order to model brave, confident behaviors to our kids, parents need to take care of their own mental health. Make sure you are utilizing the skills above to be a great example of anxiety management for your kids.

Next Steps:

You don't have to wait until your child is in crisis to seek support. If you start to notice that your child continuously struggles to manage their anxiety, it may be helpful to contact your pediatrician or a local therapist, or talk to the counselor at your child's school. Some children benefit from medication management in addition to the strategies above. This is an opportunity to show your child that their mental health is important and their feelings matter.

Additional Resources:

Brighter Futures for Anxious Kids: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/03/anxious-kids>

GoZen!, an online social and emotional learning program for kids 5-15: <https://gozen.com/>

How to Help Kids with Social Anxiety: <https://www.psychom.net/social-anxiety-how-to-help-kids>