

Please find below valuable information regarding anxiety in children.

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Understanding and supporting anxiety in your child

Anxiety is an absolutely normal human response which we all experience from time to time. It gives rise to our fight, flight or freeze response which can help us to manage dangerous or difficult situations and keep us safe. Problems arise when we feel anxiety a disproportionate amount of the time, or these feelings are triggered in circumstances which pose no threat or when our anxiety begins to have a significant impact on our ability to continue our day to day lives.

How common is it?

This is true in the case of about 3.3% of children and young people in the UK – that's about 290,000 children. 2.2% or 96,000 of children under 10 and 4.4% or 195,000 of young people aged over 10 suffer with anxiety disorder^[1] ([Young Minds](#)); so it is far from a rare condition, but it is often misunderstood, missed or misdiagnosed.

Why do children and young people develop anxiety?

There are a wide range of reasons why a child may develop an anxiety disorder and sometimes there is no obvious reason at all.

Some people are naturally more anxious than others and more prone to developing unmanageable levels of anxiety.

Others may have other health conditions which make them more prone to developing symptoms of anxiety. These commonly include:

- Autism
- Asperger's Syndrome
- ADHD
- Depression
- Eating disorders or self-harm

For many young people there will be a trigger that causes their anxiety. Common triggers include:

- Abuse or trauma
- Bereavement
- Separation, divorce or other difficulties at home
- Bullying or friendship difficulties
- Increased pressure at school, especially public examinations
- Physical illness or injury
- Change in circumstances such as a new home or moving schools

It is not uncommon for an anxiety disorder to become established and to continue long after the initial trigger has ceased to pose a specific issue, but the sooner we are able to recognise the symptoms and offer support, the better able we are to support a child in overcoming their anxiety.

How can I tell? What does anxiety look like?

You might observe physical symptoms of panic in your child – these are the feelings that gear us up to manage high stress situations, so your child's body is responding as it would if they came face to face with a grizzly bear. Symptoms might include:

- Increased heart rate
- Fast shallow breathing
- Feeling shaky, faint or dizzy
- Sweating

You may also observe a pattern of anxious thoughts, feelings or behaviours in your child. These might include:

- Often feeling scared, panicky or embarrassed, perhaps disproportionately so
- Cancelling or avoiding activities which worry them
- Becoming increasingly isolated
- Being unwilling or unable to try new things or go to new places
- Feeling incredibly tired (anxiety is exhausting!)
- Anger or irritability – this might come in sudden, surprising bursts
- Difficulties with eating, sleeping or concentrating
- Visual irregularities, such as seeing stars, shimmers, blurs, halos or shadows

The time to worry is when your child's response seems to be disproportionate to the situation or when their symptoms are beginning to have a significant impact on their day to day life. Perhaps they are doing less well at school, no longer engaging with activities they once enjoyed or distancing themselves from family or friends.

What should I do if I'm concerned?

The most important thing to do is to make it possible for your child to talk to you or another trusted adult about how they're feeling. Many children will feel frightened or embarrassed about what is happening to them or may feel they should be able to manage without support, so they can be reluctant to seek help. It can be important to reassure your child that:

- You love them (we often forget to say or show this)
- You are not angry or upset with them
- You will not be judgemental about what they tell you
- You are keen to offer practical support to help make them feel better
- Things do not have to feel like they feel now

When your child talks to you about their anxiety, there can often be practical steps you can take to help them. Talking through a typical day and understanding at which points your child feels most anxious can really help you to find practical solutions together – if for example your child feels especially anxious arriving alone at school when it's very busy, perhaps help them identify a friend who might walk with them into school or if they are especially anxious about upcoming exams, support them in writing, and sticking to, a revision timetable.

Try to encourage open conversation and problem solving together. Where possible, help your child to help themselves rather than fixing things for them. In doing so, you are helping them to build the skills they need to manage anxiety again on future occasions.

Looking after our physical wellbeing can have a huge impact on our mental wellbeing so support your child in eating healthily, getting enough exercise and sleeping well. You can also help your child to learn and use calming and relaxation techniques. Different things work well for different people but examples include practising mindfulness, using breathing exercises or using techniques such as Yoga or Pilates. Your child may also be able to identify activities that help to calm them down such as colouring, writing, physical activity or listening to calming music.

As well as providing practical and emotional listening and support yourself, if your child's anxiety has been ongoing for a few weeks or more and / or is having a significant impact on their normal life and routines, then it is important to seek further support. Good sources of support can often be your child's school or your GP who may be able to provide access to treatment or support to your child to understand and manage their difficulties.

Dr Pooky Knightsmith(link is external) is the director of the children, young people and school's programme at the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust(link is external). The Trust provides workshops(link is external) for parents, teachers and school staff to raise awareness of mental health issues.

Tweet: @PookyH(link is external)

Resources

- Practising relaxation techniques can help people cope with anxiety and panic attacks. Mind has some brilliant advice on ways to try to calm down when feeling very anxious(link is external), including a specific page with advice on relaxation techniques(link is external).
- Mind also has information on how to ask for a referral to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), types of therapy your child may receive, as well as information on the private sector: <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/anxiety-treatments/#.VpZeJRWLSUk>(link is external)
- CAMHS are very much in demand and therefore you often have to wait a long time before receiving treatment. There are lots of self-help services you can use in the meantime on sites like Mind(link is external) and Young Minds(link is external). Anxiety UK(link is external) also offer resources, support, and a live web chat line for people with anxiety disorder. Reading other people's experiences about how they coped while waiting for treatment can also help sufferers feel less alone - <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories/life-in-limbo-waiting-for-talking-therapy/#.Vpez6RWLSUI>(link is external)
- CAMHS glossary<http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for-children-young-people/a-guide-to-mental-health-services/glossary>(link is external)