



Worries and anxieties: helping children to cope

Information for anyone who lives and/or works with children and young people

Why do children worry?

Children, like adults, have all sorts of strong feelings about what is happening to them. It's natural for them to feel fearful or worried from time to time. However, a small group of children and young people have severe anxiety which causes a lot of distress, and can seriously affect their everyday lives. Anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems with nearly 300,000 young people in Britain having an anxiety disorder. Lots of people however suffer in silence, It is important to recognise their difficulties and seek help, especially when it starts affecting their everyday life.

What are the signs of anxiety?

Anxieties are grouped based on what the dear or worry is about and can cause both physical and emotional symptoms. This means it can affect how a person feels in their body and their health. Some of the symptoms are:

- Feeling fearful or panicky
- Feeling breathless, sweaty, or complaining of 'butterflies' or pains in the chest or stomach
- Feeling tense, fidgety, using the toilet often.

These symptoms may come and go. Young children can't tell you that they are anxious. They become irritable, tearful and clingy, have difficulty sleeping, and can wake in the night or have bad dreams. Anxiety can even cause a child to develop a headache, a stomach ache or to feel sick.

What causes these worries and anxieties?

We do not really know what causes this condition. However, several things can contribute to anxiety in children, such as genes, where they live, having upsetting or traumatic experiences.

- Anxiety tends to run in families, so if someone in your family is known to worry a lot, their children may be more likely to worry as well. Some of this will be passed on in the genes, but children may also learn anxious behaviour from being around anxious people
- Children who are bullied, lack friends or have trouble with their schoolwork often worry a lot
- A child who has experienced a household fire or a burglary, a car accident or some other frightening or traumatic event, might suffer from anxiety afterward.
- Children who have to cope with stressful situations such as bereavement, parental illness or divorce often become anxious and insecure. They may be able to manage one event, but may struggle to cope if several difficult things happen together, such as parents divorcing, moving home and changing schools.
- Children need parents or caregivers to sooth them effectively. Young children can feel worried and anxious if they hear or see their parents arguing or fighting. If children sense their family or friends are anxious or harsh, it can make them feel more anxious. This leaves them feeling unsupported, insecure and lacking in confidence and can also be linked with separation anxiety.

What can I do to help?

A lot can be done to stop children being anxious. Parents and teachers can help by remembering that children, like adults, may get anxious about sudden change.

- It helps if you can prepare children in advance and explain what is going to happen and why
- Regular routines around bedtimes and getting ready for school can help very young children with separation anxiety

- There may be books or games that can help children to understand upsetting things, such as serious illness, separation or bereavement
- Children over the age of 5 often find it helpful to talk about their worries to an understanding adult, which could be someone outside the immediate family
- Children may need comfort, reassurance and practical help with how to cope.

If your child is showing signs of anxiety, it is important that you can show them that you care and want to understand the reason why

- Is there something going on in the family that could be causing worry?
- Are they picking up on your own worry?
- Is something happening at school or with friends?

All families have times when they have to deal with a lot of stress and worry. At times like these, you or your child might need extra help and support from friends, family members or others.

How is Anxiety treated?

If your child is so anxious that they can't cope with ordinary day to day life, more specialist help is needed. The type of specialist help offered will depend on what is causing the anxiety. Basically, it will involve finding ways of overcoming the worries and building confidence step by step. Usually it will be a form of talking therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT can help the child understand what causes their anxiety and find strategies for coping. Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in helping children manage their anxiety and are advised how to do this effectively. Occasionally, a child might also be given medication to help if their anxiety problem has not gotten much better. Anxiety can be really difficult to live with for both the young person and family, but it is treatable.

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