

## **Childhood Anxiety Disorders**

Anxiety is a natural human reaction, it's an alarm system that's activated whenever we perceive danger or a threat. When the body and mind react, one feels physical sensations, like dizziness, a rapid heartbeat, difficulty breathing, and sweaty or shaky hands and feet. Everyone experiences feelings of anxiety from time to time. These feelings can range from a mild sense of uneasiness to full-blown panic (or anywhere in between), depending on the person and the situation. It can be experienced in many different ways – physically, emotionally, and in the way people view the world around them.

It's natural for unfamiliar or challenging situations to prompt feelings of anxiety or nervousness in people of all ages. Kids feel it, too – when facing an important test or switching schools, for example. These experiences can trigger normal anxiety because they cause us to focus on the "what if's": What if I mess up? What if things don't go as I planned? Anxiety mainly relates to worry about what *might* happen – excessive worry, fear or doubt, leading to interference in academic and/or social activities.

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health conditions. Anxiety disorders affect about 40 million American adults and an estimated 10% of children. There are many different types of anxiety disorders, with different symptoms. But they all share one common trait – prolonged, intense anxiety that is out of proportion to the present situation and affects a person's daily life and happiness. Some typical childhood anxiety disorders include:

**Generalized anxiety.** With this common anxiety disorder, children worry excessively about many things, such as school, the health or safety of family members, or the future in general. They may always think of the worst that could happen. Along with the worry and dread, kids may have physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomachaches, muscle tension, or tiredness. Their worries might cause them to miss school or avoid social activities. With generalized anxiety, worries can feel like a burden, making life feel overwhelming or out of control. **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).** For a person with OCD, anxiety takes the form of obsessions (excessively preoccupying thoughts) and compulsions (repetitive actions to try to relieve anxiety).

**Phobias.** These are intense fears of specific things or situations that are not inherently dangerous, such as heights, dogs, or flying in an airplane. Phobias usually cause people to avoid the things they fear.

**Social phobia (social anxiety).** This anxiety is triggered by social situations or speaking in front of others. A less common form called selective mutism causes some kids and teens to be too fearful to talk at all in certain situations.

**Panic attacks.** These episodes of anxiety can occur for no apparent reason. During a panic attack, a child typically has sudden and intense physical symptoms that can include a pounding heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, numbness, or tingling feelings. Agoraphobia is an intense fear of panic attacks that causes a person to avoid going anywhere a panic attack could possibly occur.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).** This type of anxiety disorder results from a traumatic past experience. Symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, fear, and avoidance of the traumatic event that caused the anxiety.

Symptoms of an anxiety disorder can come on suddenly or can build gradually and linger. Sometimes worry creates a sense of doom and foreboding that seems to come out of nowhere. Kids with anxiety problems may not even know what's causing the emotions, worries, and sensations they have. Although all kids experience anxiety in certain situations, most (even those who live through traumatic events) don't develop anxiety disorders. Signs of an anxiety disorder include:

- Excessive worry most days of the week, for weeks on end
- Trouble sleeping at night or sleepiness during the day
- Restlessness or fatigue during waking hours
- Trouble concentrating
- Irritability
- Shortness of breath
- Heart palpitations
- An inability to be still and calm
- Dry mouth
- Nausea
- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Dizziness

These problems can affect a child's day-to-day functioning, especially when it comes to concentrating in school, sleeping, and eating. Anxious children can be highly motivated but frustrated, easily discouraged, irritable and will often be tired in the classroom, become withdrawn and participate less and less in class.

It is common for kids to avoid talking about how they feel, because they're worried that others (especially their parents) might not understand. They may fear being judged or considered weak, scared, or "babyish." And although girls are more likely to express their anxiety, boys experience these feelings, too, and sometimes find it hard to talk about. This leads many kids to feel alone or misunderstood.

Here are some things you can do to help a child struggling with anxiety:

- Be attuned to the child's feelings acknowledge them in a supportive, nonjudgmental way.
- Talk openly about the child's symptoms and try to understand how they are affecting everyday life.
- Stay calm when a child becomes anxious.
- Recognize and praise accomplishments no matter how small.
- Avoid punishment for lack of progress or mistakes.
- Try to maintain a routine.
- Plan for transitions (extra time in the morning if getting to school is difficult).
- Communicate with other adults in the child's life so that they can best support.
- Build the child's coping techniques/relaxation methods – deep breathing, positive self-talk, time-outs.
- Be patient and positive.
- Remind the child that letting go of worry allows space for more happiness and fun.

(Sources: <a href="www.nimh.nih.gov">www.adaa.org</a>; <a href="www.adaa.org">www.adaa.org</a>; <a href="www.adaa.org">wwww.adaa.org</a>; <a href="www.adaa.org"