

What's Normal Anxiety?

Even in the best of situations, all children experience some anxiety in the form of worry, apprehension, dread, fear or distress. Occasional nervousness and fleeting anxieties occur when a child is first faced with an unfamiliar or especially stressful situation. It can be an important protection or signal for caution in certain situations. In fact there are specific expected fears that accompany each stage of child development.

Anxiety: Normal and Necessary

From toddlers to teens, life's challenges may be met with a *temporary* retreat from the situation, a greater reliance on parents for reassurance, a reluctance to take chances, and a wavering confidence. Typically these concerns will resolve when the child learns to master the situation or the situation changes.

Incorporating their newfound abilities, whether it is mastering a new school, the neighborhood pool, taking tests, encountering dogs, kids move on from their fears and have no lasting ill-effects. Parents can facilitate a child's successful adjustment to a new challenge by: (1) being accepting of the child's concerns, (2) listening to the child's perceptions, and gently correcting misinformation, and (3) patiently encouraging a child to approach a feared situation one step at a time until it becomes familiar and manageable.



Typical Childhood Fears

Infancy

In response to a growing ability to differentiate familiar faces (parents) from unfamiliar, stranger anxiety (clinging and crying when a stranger approaches) develops around 7-9 months and typically resolves by end of first year.

Early Childhood

As a healthy attachment to parents grows, separation anxiety (crying, sadness, fear of desertion upon separation) emerges around one year and improves over the next 3 years, resolving in most children by the end of kindergarten. As children's worlds expand, they may fear new and unfamiliar situations, and real and imagined dangers from big dogs, to spiders, to monsters. Children from age 3-6 are trying to master what is real and what is not, and until this is resolved, they may have difficulty with costumed characters, ghosts, and supernatural beings. While trying to master fears of what *could* be they may struggle with the dark, the basement, closets, and under the bed. As a child learns how to manage and put aside these fears, their ability to sleep alone will be secured.

School Aged Children



Each year, with access to new information, children begin to fear real world dangers-fire drills, burglars, storms, illness, or drugs. With experience, they learn that these risks can exist as remote, rather than imminent dangers. In middle school, the growing importance of social status leads to social comparisons and worries about social acceptance. Concerns about academic and athletic performance, and social group identification are normal. Learning about various physical and mental health diseases in school may lead to some temporary concerns

about risk and safety. Teenagers continue to be focused on social acceptance, but with a greater concern for finding a group that reflects their chosen identity. Concerns about the larger world, moral issues and their future successes are common.

When You Should be Concerned

Anxiety is considered a disorder not based on *what* a child is worrying about, but rather how that worry is impacting a child's functioning. The content may be "normal" but help is needed when a child is experiencing too much worry or suffering immensely over what may appear to be insignificant situations, when worry and avoidance become a child's automatic response in many situations, when they feel constantly keyed up, or when coaxing or reassurance are ineffective in moving them through. For these children anxiety is not protecting them, but rather preventing them from fully participating in typical activities of daily life-school, friendships, academic performance.



Problem Anxieties

Unremitting anxiety lasting for weeks or months at a time can cause physical distress in the form of headaches, stomachaches, nausea, vomiting and sleeplessness, Difficulty sleeping, reluctance to go to school or elsewhere outside of the child's comfort zone, crying jags, tantrums and clinginess are common. Anxiety can also interfere with a child's concentration and decision-making. An anxious child's thinking is typically unrealistic, catastrophic and pessimistic. They may seek excessive reassurance and yet the benefit of that reassurance is fleeting. Irritability and anger can also be red flags for anxiety when a child becomes frustrated by the stress of worry, or worn down from sleep deprivation. For some children, feeling "different" from other kids can be an additional source of concern.

Common Red flags

Demonstrating excessive distress out of proportion to the situation: crying, physical symptoms, sadness, anger, frustration, hopelessness, embarrassment

- Easily distressed, or agitated when in a stressful situation
- Repetitive reassurance questions, "what if" concerns, inconsolable, won't respond to logical arguments
- Headaches, stomachaches, regularly too sick to go to school
- Anticipatory anxiety, worrying hours, days, weeks ahead
- Disruptions of sleep with difficulty falling asleep, frequent nightmares, difficulty sleeping alone
- Perfectionism, self-critical, very high standards that make nothing good enough
- Overly-responsible, people pleasing, excessive concern that others are upset with him or her, unnecessary apologizing
- Demonstrating excessive avoidance, refuses to participate in expected activities, refusal to attend school
- Disruption of child or family functioning, difficulty with going to school, friend's houses, religious activities, family gatherings, errands, vacations
- Excessive time spent consoling child about distress with ordinary situations, excessive time coaxing child to do normal activities- homework, hygiene, meals.



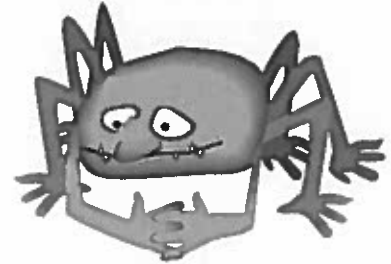
adapted from: www.worrywisekids.org

Passing on your fears

Try to keep your fears to yourself and as best you can present a positive or at least neutral description of a situation. Let them know that it is safe to explore. It is not helpful to laugh or minimize your child's fear. But humor does help one deal with the world, so show your child how to laugh at life's absurdities and mistakes.

Expectations of your child

It's important that you have the same expectations of your anxious child that you would of another child (to go to birthday parties, make decisions, talk to adults). However, understand that the pace will need to be slower and there is a process involved in meeting this end goal. You can help your child break down big tasks into smaller steps that your child can accomplish (first go to the party with your child and agree to stay as long as your child is interacting with others, next time stay for the first half hour). You can help role-play or act out possible ways your child could handle a difficult situation. Saying it out loud makes kids more confident and more likely to try the strategy when your child is alone.



Build your child's personal strength

It's important to praise your child for facing challenges, trying something new or brave behavior. Some children like big loud exuberant praises, others like a quiet pat on the back. There is a lot you can do to help build your child's competence. Search to find avenues where your child can show he is good at something (music, art, sports). Also be sure your child has jobs around the house that show your child is contributing to the family.

Letting your child learn to do things on his/her own

While tempting, it is best not to take over or do it for your child. While this might help your child feel better right now, the message your child is getting is that you don't believe your child can do it. Then your child will start to think the same way about him or herself. Try not to get caught continually reassuring your child that everything will be okay. Teach your child to answer his/her own questions and provide the reassurance him/herself. You can model how you think through and respond to your child's questions.

Helping your child handle his own feelings

It is okay to let your child experience some anxiety. Your child needs to know that anxiety is not dangerous but something your child can cope with. You can let your child know all feelings are okay and it is all right to say what you feel. Anxious children sometimes have a hard time expressing strong emotions like anger or sadness because they are afraid people will be angry with them. It's okay to take time for yourself even if your child wants to be with you at all times. You are modeling for your child that everyone needs some time to themselves.

Working together as parents

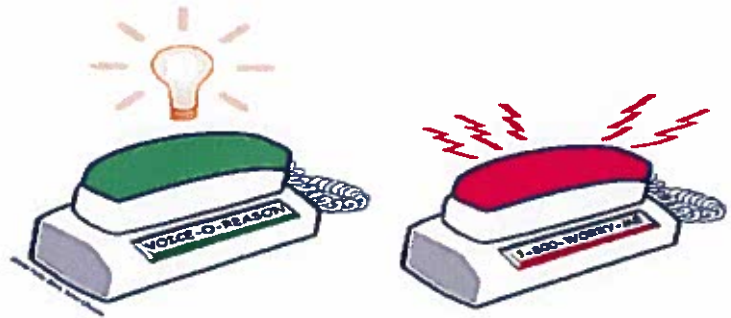
It is important to work with your spouse to have an agreed upon way of handling your child's anxiety that you both feel comfortable with. It is very important that one parent not be "too easy" because the other parent "pushes your child too much." This is very confusing for your child who does not know what to count on.

Consequences

Don't confuse anxiety with other types of inappropriate behavior. It is very important to set both expectations and have limits and consequences for inappropriate behavior. Parents who have reasonable expectations of their children and clear and consistent limits and consequences for behavior along with love and acceptance have the most competent, self confident and happy children.

Though we may all experience anxiety from time to time, when it comes to trying to explain to youngsters the ins and outs of how anxiety works, we may be at a loss. When talking to children about anxiety, it is important to convey that anxious children are not alone, that aside from the millions and millions of children who have an anxiety disorder, that every child experiences anxiety from time to time. It is also important to convey optimism that with the right strategies, anxious children can learn to overcome anxiety—filter out unnecessary thoughts, create a more accurate version of a situation, and learn to face their fears one step at a time.

When kids are stuck in the spin of worry, it is tempting to simply reassure them that they are fine. But then they wonder, if everything is fine, why do I still *feel* so scared? Rather than reassuring, if we teach children how worry works, they can challenge and outsmart the worry themselves. This worry wisdom gives kids a sense of power which they can take with them wherever they go.



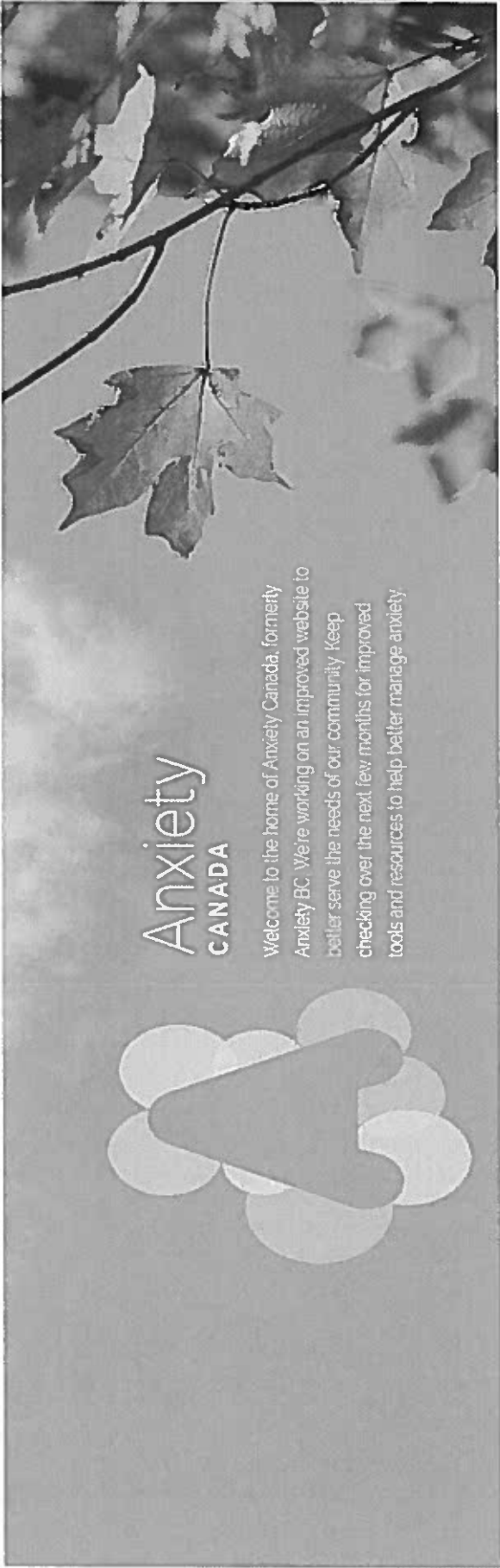
The first step is recognizing the sound of worry, give it a name if you like-worrybug, exaggerator guy, disaster man. The second step is deciding how much value to place on anxious messages. When we hear the "worry story" as an accurate read on a situation, we feel very anxious and out of control. If instead, when we hear the familiar, "what if, and oh nos" of anxiety, we say, "I'm not listening, worry plays tricks, exaggerating risks, underestimating our ability to cope, racing ahead and catastrophizing." Instead of falling for the tricks and worrying about "the worst that could happen in a situation," we can refocus on "what we really believe is likely to happen in a situation." This smart version of the story, based on the facts not the "scaries", is much easier to handle. Specific suggestions for how to approach this with very young children, and with school aged children and adolescents can be found in *Freeing Your Child from Anxiety*, by Dr. Tamar Chansky.

Idea Box for older kids

Outside of the heat of a worry moment, you can let your child know that worry is the body's alarm system causing false alarms. Maybe a situation is a little bit risky or scary, but worry exaggerates so much that you feel afraid to try at all. It's like your mind is seeing everything through worry glasses, and makes you think of all the things that could go wrong, all the what ifs?. Worry makes you feel like those bad things are *likely*, but just because you're *feeling* scared, doesn't mean the bad thing is going to happen. It's like your reading a scary story—you're going to feel scared, but it doesn't mean that you are in danger. You can learn to label your worry thoughts and treat them differently from your smart or rational thoughts. Worry is no voice to trust, but you have a choice. What if you heard the worry voice to the tune of "Old McDonald" or imagined a comedian like Adam Sandler saying the worry story—would you feel scared? Once you learn how to recognize the sound of worry, you can begin to feel free to take the power away from it. Overtime, you can turn down the volume on those worry thoughts and your brain will calm down and you will have a direct line to more calm, realistic thinking. If your mind tells you the true story about a situation, you will feel more confident approaching it because you know what the real risks are and that they are unlikely. Have the child make two pair of glasses, the worry glasses, and the smart glasses-- have him or her describe the situation through the different glasses and highlight the differences; Use thought bubbles to denote the "worry story" and the "smart story."

Idea Box for young kids:

In the context of a game or roleplay, parents can use puppets or a silly voice to differentiate worry thinking from regular thinking. A worry bug can be buzzing around, scaring a stuffed animal, say an elephant who is afraid of dogs, only because the worry bug keeps saying mean, bossy things—"you can't play with the doggy, doggies bark and you are too scared." Parents can then turn to your child and say, "Wow that worry bug is being so mean, and it's not right. It is saying that all doggies are mean, that's not true, let's think of some nice doggies. So now when we go for a walk and the worry bug tries to scare you, you can be brave and boss it back! Let's use a strong voice and say, "Hey worry bug, doggies can be nice, go away, I'm the boss!" Use stuffed animals to play out the parts, ask the child what the stuffed animal is afraid of; use a different stuffed animal to say the "brave" thoughts about the situation.



Anxiety CANADA

Welcome to the home of Anxiety Canada, formerly Anxiety BC. We're working on an improved website to better serve the needs of our community. Keep checking over the next few months for improved tools and resources to help better manage anxiety.



QUICKLINKS

- 📱 My Anxiety Plan (MAP) - Child
- 📱 My Anxiety Plan (MAP) - Adult
- 📱 EASE Workshops
- 📱 Educators



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