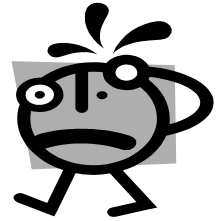


## What's Normal Anxiety?

Even in the best of situations, all children experience some anxiety in the form of worry, dread, fear or distress. Some nervousness and anxieties occur when a child is first faced with a new or stressful situation. Anxiety 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 need for parent's reassurance, a reluctance to take chances, and a loss of some confidence. Typically these concerns will resolve when the child learns to deal with the situation or the situation changes. Using their newfound abilities, whether it is a new school, the neighborhood pool, taking tests, encountering dogs, etc., kids move on from their fears and have no lasting ill-effects. Parents can help a child cope with a new challenge by: (1) accepting the child's concerns, (2) listening to the child's views, and gently correcting any wrong information, 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**

As babies learn to recognize familiar faces (parents), stranger anxiety (clinging and crying when a stranger approaches) develops around 7-9 months and typically is gone by the end of first year.

### **Early Childhood**

As a healthy attachment to parents grows, separation anxiety (crying, sadness, fear of being left alone) starts 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 (spiders, big dogs) and imagined dangers (monsters). Children from age 3-6 are trying to figure out what is real and what is not. Until they figure this out, they may have difficulty with costumed characters, ghosts, and supernatural beings. While trying to master their fears of what *could* be they may struggle with the dark, the basement, closets, and what is "under the bed". As a child learns how to manage and put aside these fears, their ability to sleep alone will increase.

### **School Aged Children**



Each year, with access to new information from TV, school, and older kids, children begin to fear real world dangers such as fire drills, burglars, storms, illness, or drugs. With experience, they learn that these risks can exist as remote, rather than immediate 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 peer group acceptance 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 based on how worry is *impacting a child's functioning*. The content (what is being worried about) may be "normal", but help is needed when a child is experiencing too much worry or suffering a lot over what may appear to be normal 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 not enough to help them through, professional help is needed. 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

Anxiety that lasts 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 reactions to high anxiety. Anxiety can also interfere with a child's concentration and decision-making. An anxious child's thinking is typically unrealistic and negative. They may seek a lot of reassurance and yet the benefit of that reassurance is temporary. Sometimes the stress of worry gets in the way of good sleep, which in turn leaves a child more irritable and more easily angered. For some children, feeling "different" from other kids can be an additional source of concern.

## Common "Red Flags"

- Distress which is way out of proportion to the situation: crying, physical symptoms, sadness, anger, frustration, hopelessness, embarrassment over
- Easily distressed, or agitated when in a stressful situation
- Always seeking reassurance, asking many "what if" questions, won't respond to logical arguments
- Regularly too sick to go to school (headaches, stomachaches)
- Worrying for hours, days, weeks ahead of an event
- Poor sleeping patterns: difficulty falling asleep, frequent nightmares, difficulty sleeping alone
- Perfectionism, self-critical, very high standards (nothing is good enough)
- Overly-responsible, people pleasing, excessive concern that others are upset with him or her, unnecessary apologizing
- Avoiding people or situations, refusing to participate in expected activities, refusal to attend school
- Disruption of child or family functioning; difficulty with going to friend's houses, religious activities, family gatherings, errands, vacations
- The parent spends a lot of time spent consoling child about distress with ordinary situations, excessive time coaxing child to do normal activities- homework, hygiene, meals.

