

Anxiety in Children

Since we have been in school for a few months, and the holidays are fast approaching, now is a good time to talk about anxiety in children. A common definition of anxiety is: *a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.*

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting approximately 40 million adults, age 18 and older (about 18%). An estimated 32% of adolescents have had an anxiety disorder, and approximately 12% of children (or 1 in 8). Anxiety disorders are highly treatable, yet only about 36% of those suffering receive treatment.

When we are addressing anxiety there are two points that are important to keep in mind:

1. ***Anxiety and fear are normal reactions to stress or threat. When these responses become excessive, they have the potential to disrupt a child's ability to function academically and socially.***
2. ***We will not ever eliminate anxiety in children, it is our goal to help children learn to tolerate and decrease feelings and anxiety, and continue to function.***

We can expect children to show anxiety symptoms in a variety of ways, including physical, thoughts/thinking, behaviors, and emotional responses. When these things start to happen, we need to both listen to our children's words, and observe their behaviors. They may be anxious about something without realizing it. They may think they are upset about something else entirely, and will need some guidance to understand what is at the heart of the difficulty. Additionally, some home-based strategies are listed below that can be helpful in reducing anxiety in children.

- Be consistent in how you handle problems and administer discipline.
- Be patient and be prepared to listen.
- Maintain realistic, attainable goals and expectations for your child.
- Do not communicate that perfection is expected or acceptable.
- Maintain consistent but flexible routines for homework, chores, activities, etc.
- Accept that mistakes are a normal part of growing up and that no one is expected to do everything equally well.
- Praise and reinforce effort, even if success is less than expected. Practice and rehearse upcoming events, both large and small.
- Teach your child simple strategies to help with anxiety, such as organizing materials and time, developing small scripts of what to do and say to himself or herself when anxiety increases, and learning how to relax under stressful conditions.
- Do not treat feelings, questions, and statements about feeling anxious as silly or unimportant.
- Seek outside help if the problem persists and continues to interfere with daily activities.

A rule of thumb to follow when helping your children with anxiety is:

Acknowledge, Validate, Normalize, and Reassure.

When a child shares a fear or worry with you, make sure you acknowledge that you know it is making them feel anxious. Validate their feelings by indicating you understand why they are feeling that way. Normalize the issue by giving examples of how you or others have experienced similar feelings for similar reasons. Reassure your child that you will help them, that they will be okay, and utilize anxiety-reducing strategies.

For more information about anxiety in children, please refer to this [article from NASP](#), the National Association of School Psychologist.

All the best,
Michelle Flannery, Ed.S., NCSP