

Guidance Guide

Do I Need to Worry About My Child's Anxiety?

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As students end their first month of classes, the reality of the school year is starting to set in. Although the newness is still there, it is starting to fade and routines are becoming more established. Some of the students are looking more relaxed and confident while others look a bit overwhelmed.

According to *Medical News Today*, people often experience a general state of worry or fear before confronting something challenging. Our students at EDS have had plenty of challenges throughout the past few weeks. For some students this is a new school. For the rest of the student population newness is also everywhere. New grades levels, new teachers, classrooms, students, expectations, etc.

Normalized Anxiety

A certain amount of anxiety is a normal part of a child's healthy development. Anxiety is what can get our children out of bed in the morning, motivate them to study harder and be on their best behavior.

Frustration and repeated difficulties in social relationships and school performance can lead to increased anxiety about being embarrassed in front of peers, as well as fears about letting down parents or teacher. Though these feelings are all normal, if they don't subside with time and instead escalate or begin to interfere with a child's daily activities, there may be more cause for concern (Keath Low).

Problematic Anxiety

Anxiety is considered a problem when symptoms become disruptive to someone's overall level of happiness and an ability to lead a normal life. Excessive worry, problems falling asleep or staying asleep and

poor concentration are just a few symptoms. Approximately 5% to 10% of children in the general population struggle with anxiety disorders.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a general term for several disorders that cause nervousness, fear, apprehension and worrying. These disorders affect how we feel and behave, and they can manifest real physical symptoms. Mild anxiety is vague and unsettling while severe anxiety can be extremely debilitating.

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety disorders may be caused by environmental factors, medical factors, genetics, brain chemistry, substance abuse, or a combination of these. It is most commonly triggered by stress. Usually anxiety is a response to outside forces, but it is possible that some people make themselves anxious with "negative self-talk" - a habitual thinking pattern that engages in worst possible case scenarios.

How does the anxious child behave?

Anxious kids can be quiet, shy, cautious and withdrawn. They may be very compliant and eager to please adults. On the other hand, an anxious child may "act out" with tantrums, crying, avoidance and disobedience.

As a parent, it is important to be aware of some of the ways severe anxiety can show up in children. With increased awareness, you will be able to intervene and get help.

Different Types of Anxiety

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)

The child or adolescent worries excessively about a variety of things such as grades, family issues, relationships with peers, and performance in sports.

Kids with GAD tend to be very hard on themselves and strive for perfection. They may also seek constant approval or reassurance from others.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

OCD is characterized by unwanted and intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and feeling compelled to repeatedly perform rituals and routines (compulsions) to try and ease anxiety.

Most children with OCD are diagnosed around age 10, although the disorder can strike children as young as two or three. Boys are more likely to develop OCD before puberty, while girls tend to develop it during adolescence.

Panic Disorder

The child or adolescent have unexpected and repeated periods of intense fear or discomfort along with other symptoms such as racing heartbeat or feeling short of breath. This can last for minutes to hours. It frequently develops without warning. Symptoms can also include dizziness/lightheadedness, shortness of breath or a feeling of being smothered, trembling or shaking, a sense of unreality and fear of dying, losing control or losing your mind (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The individual may have intense fear and anxiety, becoming emotionally numb or easily irritable, or avoid places, people or activities after experiencing a traumatic event.

Not every child who experiences or hears about a traumatic event will develop PTSD. It is normal to be fearful, sad or apprehensive after such events and many children will recover from these feelings in a short time.

Children most at risk for PTSD are those who directly witnessed a traumatic event, who suffered directly

(such as injury or the death of a parent), had mental health problems before the event and who lack a strong support network. Violence at home also increases a child's risk of developing PTSD after a traumatic event.

Separation Anxiety Disorder

Many children experience separation anxiety between 18 months and three years old when it is normal to feel some anxiety when a parent leaves the room or goes out of sight. Usually children can be distracted from these feelings.

It's also common for your child to cry when first being left at daycare or preschool and crying usually subsides after becoming engaged in the new environment.

If your child is slightly older and unable to leave you or another family member, or takes longer to calm down after you leave than other children, then the problem could be separation anxiety disorder, which affects 4 percent of children. This disorder is most common in kids age's seven to nine. Symptoms include excessive anxiety away from home or when separated from parents/caregivers, extreme homesickness and feelings of misery when separated from loved ones.

Other symptoms include refusing to go to school, camp, or a sleepover, and demanding that someone stay with them at bedtime. Children with separation anxiety commonly worry about bad things happening to their parents or caregivers or may have a vague sense of something terrible occurring while they are apart.

Social Anxiety Disorder

This is also referred to as social phobia. It is characterized by an intense fear of social and performance situations and activities such as being called on in class or starting a conversation with their peers.

This can significantly impair your child's school performance and attendance, as well as his or her ability to socialize with peers and develop and maintain relationships.

Selective Mutism

Children who refuse to speak in situations where talking is expected or necessary, to the extent that their refusal interferes with school and making friends.

Children suffering from selective mutism may stand motionless and expressionless, turn their heads, chew or twirl hair, avoid eye contact or withdraw in to a corner to avoid talking.

These children can be very talkative and display normal behaviors at home or in another place where they feel comfortable. Parents are sometimes surprised to learn from a teacher that their child refuses to speak at school.

The average age of diagnoses is between 4 and 8 years old or around the time a child enters school.

Specific Phobia

An intense, irrational fear of a specific object, such as a dog, or a situation such as flying. Common childhood phobias include animals, storms, heights, water, blood, the dark and medical procedures.

Children will avoid situations or things that they fear. Anxious symptoms can manifest as crying, tantrums, clinging, avoidance, headaches, and stomachaches. Unlike adults, children do not usually recognize that their fear is irrational.

*Anxiety and Depression Association of America

How to help your anxious child

Listen. You know how enormously comforting it can be just to have someone listen when something is bothering you. Do the same for your child. If they don't feel like talking, let them know you are there for them. Reassure them and remind them that you love and support them.

Offer comfort and distraction. Try to do something your child enjoys, like playing a favorite game, cuddling, reading, etc. When things are challenging, even an older child will appreciate acknowledgement, affection and attention.

Go outside. Exercise is essential. Even if it's just a walk around the block or a simple bike ride, fresh air and physical activity can help lift spirits and offer a new perspective.

Stick to routines. Balance out any changes by trying to maintain as much of a regular routine as possible. Try sticking to regular bedtime and mealtimes (even on the weekends) if possible.

Keep your child healthy. Not getting enough rest or eating nutritious meals at regular intervals can contribute to your child's stress. Protein can be a helpful addition to lots of fresh vegetables and some fruits in managing anxiety. Avoid all caffeinated products and limit sugars.

Avoid overscheduling. The list of extracurricular activities kids can take on is endless. But too many activities can easily lead to stress and anxiety in children. Just as grownups need some downtime after work and on weekends, children also need some quiet time alone to decompress.

Limit your child's exposure to upsetting news or stories. If your child sees or hears upsetting images or accounts of natural disasters or sees disturbing accounts of violence or terrorism on the news, talk to your child about what's going on. Offer facts that are age appropriate and discuss ways they may help if they seem interested.

Consult a counselor or your pediatrician. If you suspect that a change in the family such as a new sibling, a move, divorce or a death of a family member is behind your child's stress and anxiety, seek advice from an expert such as your child's guidance counselor, your pediatrician or a child therapist. They can suggest ways to help a child talk through the changes.

Set a calm example. You can set the tone for how stress and anxiety is handled in your house. It's virtually impossible to block out stress from our lives in today's high-tech, 24 hour- news- cycle world, but you can do something about how you handle your own stress. The more you are able to keep things calm and peaceful at home, the less likely it is that anxiety in children will be a problem in your household.

*Katherine Lee

Anxiety is treatable

Although anxiety can be distressing, it is also very treatable. I often say that many children and adults who struggle with anxiety would greatly reduce and sometimes eliminate their symptoms if they were working with a professional. Although medication may be helpful (and necessary) for some, it does not give you or your child the tools necessary to live a life that is more relaxed and balanced. I sometimes use the analogy of diabetes. It's certainly not fun to have it, but with certain types one can learn to manage their health with time and attention. There are many effective strategies that have proven to be statistically significant in reducing anxiety. By learning to reframe anxiety provoking thoughts and calming the body through breath and other relaxation techniques your child has the opportunity to take control of their anxiety by learning healthy coping styles that will serve him/her in their future endeavors.

Erie Day School Motto

May I live each day being mindful of the goodness that surrounds me.

May I always stretch my mind and heart so that I live my life in wisdom and love.

May I be a loyal friend to others and willingly help those in need, and may I always honor and respect the earth of which I am a part.



Erie Day School

Learning today, leading tomorrow.

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If you have any questions, comments or additions to the *Guidance Guide*, or know someone that should be included on the email distribution list, please contact Allison Parr-Plasha at 814-452-4273 or via email at aplasha@eriedayschool.com

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