

Anxiety in Children and Young People

Overview description

Anxiety is a normal, human feeling of fear or panic. When we face stressful situations, it can set off our brain's in-built alarm bell system, which tells us something isn't right and that we need to deal with it. Our brain wants the difficult situation to go away, so it makes us feel more alert, stops us thinking about other things, and even pumps more blood to our legs to help us run away.

What makes children anxious?

Children can feel anxious about different things at different ages. Many of these worries are a normal part of growing up.

From the age of around 6 months to 3 years it is very common for young children to have separation anxiety. They may become clingy and cry when separated from their parents or carers. This is a normal stage in a child's development and should stop at around age 2 to 3.

It is also common for preschool-age children to develop specific fears or phobias. Common fears in early childhood include animals, insects, storms, heights, water, blood, and the dark. These fears usually go away gradually on their own.

There may also be other times in a child's life when they feel anxious. For example, many children feel anxious when going to a new school or before tests and exams. Some children feel shy in social situations and may need support with this.

When is anxiety a problem for children?



morning.

Anxiety becomes a problem for children when it starts to get in the way of their everyday life.

If you go into any school/college at exam time, all the children will be anxious, but some may be so anxious that they don't manage to get to school/college in the



Severe anxiety like this can harm children's mental and emotional wellbeing, affecting their self-esteem and confidence. They may become withdrawn and go to great lengths to avoid things or situations that make them feel anxious.

What are the signs of anxiety in children?

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. You may notice that they:

- become irritable, tearful, or clingy
- have difficulty sleeping
- wake in the night
- start wetting the bed
- have bad dreams

In older children you may notice that they:

- lack confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems with sleeping or eating
- have angry outbursts
- have a lot of negative thoughts, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public, or going to school

Key messages to support children and young people

When children are very anxious, even the most well-meaning adults can fall into a negative cycle and, not wanting a child to suffer, may actually exacerbate the child's anxiety. It happens when adults, anticipating a child's fears, try to protect them. Here are some pointers to help children escape the cycle of anxiety.

1. The goal is not to eliminate anxiety, but to help a CYP manage it.

Helping CYPs avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. It is not about removing all stress but helping them learn to tolerate their anxiety and manage in stressful situations.

2. Express positive - but realistic – expectations.

You cannot promise a CYP that their fears are unrealistic, and that they will not, fail a test, or that they will have fun ice skating, or that another CYP will not laugh at them during show & tell. But you can express confidence that they are going to be okay, they will be able to manage it, and that, as they face their fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives them confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that they are not going to be asked to do something they cannot manage.

3. Respect their feelings, but don't enable them

It is important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. So if a child is terrified about going to the doctor for a jab, you don't want to belittle their fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. Listen and be empathetic, help them understand what they are anxious about, and encourage them to feel that they can face their fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

4. Think things through with the child.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true, and how they would handle it? A CYP who is anxious about separating from their parents might worry about what would happen if they didn't come to pick them up. So, talk about that and create an action plan with the child about what they would do if that did happen. This gives the child a chance to explore their fears and think about through a solution with a supportive adult. For some CYPs, having a plan, can reduce the anxiety in a healthy, effective way.

5. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

There are many ways you can help children handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. CYPs are perceptive, and they are going to notice if the adults continually complain about how they can't handle certain stresses or the anxieties. It is not about pretending that the stress and anxiety does not exist, but, rather, letting children hear and see adults managing it calmly, tolerating it, and feeling good about getting through it.

Evidence-base

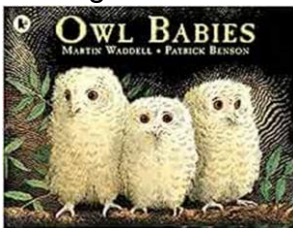
Research has shown, (Child Mind Institute), that supporting adults who want to help children and young people overcome anxiety need to do the opposite of what seems natural: not reassure them constantly that they will be fine, or brush off their anxiety, or avoid things that make them anxious. Instead, they need to validate their feelings, and express confidence that they can manage the anxiety, and help them think of ways to handle what might happen.

For children and young people with extreme and continuing anxiety, the evidence-based therapy of choice for anxiety is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT is based on the idea that how we think and act both affect how we feel. By changing thinking that is distorted, and behaviour that is dysfunctional, we can change our emotions.

Top
Tips!

For Early
Years

- Support children in building their confidence gradually and do not put pressure on them in social situations.
- Prepare children for change and transitions, use visual prompts (such as now/next board) and countdowns to support children in knowing what is happening in their day to help them feel more in control in times of uncertainty.
- Many children in the early years may show signs of separation anxiety. These children may benefit from a visual timetable so that they are aware of the countdown to home time. Consider allowing the child to bring a small transitional object into the setting, this could be a small teddy or a photo of their loved ones.
- The story 'Owl Babies' is great for reminding children that their loved ones are coming back at the end of the day.



Useful Links:

<https://www.twinkl.co.uk/news/how-to-support-young-children-with-separation-anxiety>

<https://www.annafreud.org/early-years/early-years-in-mind/common-difficulties/anxiety/>

<https://www.annafreud.org/early-years/early-years-in-mind/common-difficulties/separation-anxiety/>

Post-16

Top Tips!

- Having a sense of belonging and feeling supported by adults and friends will help to reduce students anxiety. Considering how to help the student to make friends and have a support network during a transition and throughout their time within a provision will be important.
- It is important to consider that young people will be experiencing more change within their lives including a transition to a new college or provision. Young people with high levels of anxiety can be at risk of using avoidance as a coping strategy (meaning that they may avoid lessons) and of becoming NEET.
- Young people need to learn what triggers their anxiety and how to use strategies that help them to manage and cope with their anxiety independently so that they feel confident to use them in the community, workplaces or further education. How can staff support students to understand their anxiety and be pro-active to use helpful and healthy strategies?
- Exam or coursework stress is a normal part of completing studies: how can staff help to normalise this stress and support students to manage and cope with this stress in a healthy way?
- Having good daily mental health and self-care practices will support all students: how does their curriculum or programme promote good sleep, a healthy diet and exercise?

Useful links and resources:

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/supporting-a-young-person-struggling-with-anxiety/>

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/stress-anxiety-depression/anxiety>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/how-to-get-help-and-support/useful-contacts/>

Useful Resources

Stallard, P. (2018). *Think Good, Feel Good: A CBT Workbook for children and young people*. Wiley, London.

The Friends Resiliency Programme (Professor Paula Barrett). A 10-week programme based on cognitive behavioural therapy principles that aims to reduce anxiety in children and young people.

Heubner (D). (2015). *What to do when you worry too much: A kid's guide to overcoming anxiety*. Blackwells. London.