

## Anxiety in Children

We all experience anxiety and fear from time to time. Empowering our children with tools and strategies now for dealing with anxiety and fears is preparing them for uncomfortable and challenging situations now and later on in life.

### Anxiety vs. Fear

Anxiety is defined as “apprehension without any apparent cause.” When we feel anxious about something we want to escape from the situation immediately. Anxiety is a response to something that is disproportionate to what is actually occurring. It can be more internal than external in focus. We often cannot identify the source of the anxiety.

Fear is different than anxiety in that it is externally focused on something concrete – an external object; and the reaction to this external object is proportionate to what is occurring. Being afraid about something can keep our children safe. For example if a child is afraid of fire, then they will not play with matches. That is a good thing!

Developmentally, children have different fears at different ages and stages of their development. For example: babies can be fearful of strangers; toddlers have a fear of being separated from their parents/caregivers; children aged 4-6 have fear of monsters and ghosts – difficulty differentiating reality from fantasy; and children age 7-12 have fear of real circumstances that may happen to them (ex. car accident/body injury).

### Stages of Anxiety

- ➔ The first stage of anxiety involves a triggering event (internal or external) that evokes or gives rise to the anxiety
- ➔ In stage two we experience a range of symptoms including increased heart rate, shallow breathing, muscle tension and sweating.
- ➔ The third stage of anxiety is focusing internally on the symptoms we are experiencing that further exacerbates or increases the intensity or discomfort
- ➔ In stage four we begin to “catastrophize” or our thinking about the situation is not proportionate to what is actually occurring ex. We might be thinking: “I am going to die!” or “I got to get out of here!” or “I am losing control of myself!”
- ➔ In stage five we are experiencing a panic attack. (if it progresses to this point)

### What are the symptoms?

Imagine for a moment something that you typically feel anxious or fearful about (ex. Giving a presentation, heights, social situations). What symptoms do you notice occurs when you feel anxious? Children too experience symptoms when they are confronted with something they feel anxious about (for example: sick belly; irritability; clingy/teary; and increased heart rate). Symptoms of anxiety can fall

into three categories: behavioral, emotional and physical. You know your child best. Notice what symptoms they experience when they feel anxious. The following is not intended to be an exhaustive list nor do all children experience all of these symptoms.

Behavior symptoms may include: teariness; crying; yelling/screaming; clinginess; change in eating patterns; nail biting; thumb sucking; acting out behaviour; bedwetting; nightmares; regression; and sleep disturbance.

Physical symptoms may include: sweating; stomach upset/cramps; nausea; muscle stiffness; and headaches.

Emotional symptoms may include: irritability; agitation; fearful; angry outbursts; withdrawing; isolating; and nervous/jumpy.

### **What can you do?**

- 1) Ask your child when they worry or are afraid to check in with their body by placing their hand on their tummy/stomach. Children will often say that they feel sick or have an upset stomach or they feel their muscles tense up or their heart beats really fast.
- 2) Teach them how to calm down by choosing one of these methods: visualize being in their safe place; deep abdominal breathing (imagine their lungs are balloons and letting them slowly deflate); slowing counting inside from 1 to 10; and saying "Calm Down".
- 3) Once they are calmed down, then talk to them about what they are worried about or afraid of and together problem solve how to address the issue that is giving rise to their fears or anxieties.

Sometimes children are not able to tell us what is causing them to feel anxious because they actually don't know or they don't want to talk about it because of course it makes them upset. They maybe simply taking care of themselves.

Here are some other strategies you may consider using instead:

- 1) Read stories about worrying. I recommend: Scaredy Squirrel; The Bear Who Lost His Sleep: A Story About Worrying Too Much; Is a Worry Worrying You; and Franklin in the Dark. You could then follow up talking about the characters in the story and how they dealt with their worries/fears.
- 2) Be a role model and talk to your children about what you did to overcome fears and worries that you had as a child and even today as an adult. Speak positively and confidently with them that they too will get through this.

### **What not to do**

- Don't collude with the child by having them avoid the source of their anxiety.
- Say "Just get over it!" It really isn't helpful to minimize or deny the issue.
- Rescue them – our goal is to empower our children

**Final words**

- Only way is to go through it!
- Be patient. It does take time.
- Be consistent in your approach (both parents and any significant others caring for your child)
- Consider counseling support if the problem is pervasive and persists or is negatively impacting their ability to function or enjoy life.
- Remember: What we teach them now will better prepare them to handle life difficulties and challenges now and in the future in a healthy and empowering way!

**Susan Doiron, MEd, CCC**  
**School Counsellor**