



INFORMATION FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

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Anxiety in young people

by Joseph Degeling, Psychologist

At some stage in our lives we will all experience anxiety – that horrible gnawing sense of fear, insecurity or worry that can consume and overpower our rational selves. For most of us, our experience of anxiety would be that it is a transitory or short term state that may rarely exceed our ability to cope (as is commonly associated with particular stressors, such as being called into the boss's office, or when financial pressure hits and so on). For others, though, anxiety can be more enduring and incapacitating, or it may form a more chronic pattern of responding to a specific or general stimulus that regularly tests an individual's coping mechanisms. Research indicates that the life-time prevalence of *anxiety disorders* in the general population ranges from 10.6%-16.6% - this means that between 10 and 16 people out of 100 will experience an *anxiety disorder* in their lifetime.

Anxiety generally has a biological or physical component – what we feel – and a cognitive component – what we think. As such, anxiety develops in complexity as our children grow and develop. As we all would have observed,

infants and toddlers often display fearful reactions to loud noises, strangers, when they are separated from their parents, or to novel things such as beards, sun glasses, hats and so forth. These fears are quite normal within this age bracket. When children reach the ages of 3-6, we may begin to see other forms of fear or anxieties emerge – for example, fear of the dark, an intensification of anxiety on separation from parent, fear they will be sucked down the drain with the bath water, and fear of being left alone.

Around the age of 7 onwards we may see a change in the level and types of anxiety our children experience – they may start to *worry* more. Generally, to worry about things we have to be able to conceptualise and predict the future – once again this is linked to the stage of cognitive development the child is in. Children in the early years of primary school may worry more about things that are real or tangible such as getting lost in a shopping mall, being sick, and monster's at night time. As children get older, however, their anxieties may become less concrete – they may worry more about personal, social, academic or family issues.

How do we identify anxiety in our children? We need to listen to and observe for the following signs: are they talking about feeling sick or nauseous a lot? Do they talk about a beating heart, or are they breathing really fast? Do they constantly avoid or talk about being afraid of certain things? Do they fidget, cry or cling more than usual in certain situations? Do they constantly seek reassurance from parents or teachers? Are they very reluctant to enter certain situations or do certain things?

As parents and carers it is important to know a little about whether or not our children's fears and worries are normal, and when to seek professional help. Here are some questions that may act as a guide:

- How long has the child been anxious? If for a short time (one – three weeks), then it may be quite normal. However, if it lasts more than three weeks, get some advice from the school counsellor or a registered health practitioner (psychologist, paediatrician, GP or psychiatrist).

- Talk to some other parents: are other kids this age worried about similar things?
- How much effect does this worry have on the child's life? If the child's worries do not really stop them doing things, then chances are you won't need further assistance. However, if the child's worry and anxiety prevents them from going places and doing things a lot of the time, then seeking some advice from a registered health practitioner would be strongly recommended.
- Is it getting worse over time? Is so get some assistance.
- Do teachers at school notice any symptoms of anxiety in their school work, on the playground or in the classroom?

One of the first feelings I remember upon the birth of all my children was that of protection – I was going to be their protector from all things harmful and horrible! This is a wonderfully natural response, however when it comes to anxiety it is quite possible that parents may *enable* worry, rather than help our kids cope with it. When we protect our child from exposure to anxiety we teach them that they should avoid or escape discomfort and anxiety in the future, and that the world is

actually a dangerous place. We also deny them the chance to practice and develop the skills (resilience) that would help them to cope in the future. We inadvertently encourage them to be reliant on other people and things, and enable unrealistic views of themselves and their world, while disabling rational and realistic thinking. Supportive and graded exposure to their feared situation is actually a healthy experience that will build their resilience and enhance wellbeing.

Here are my top ten tips for helping your children cope with anxiety:

1. Listen to them! The fear is real – don't ignore or dismiss their fears;
2. Seek advice from a *registered health practitioner* if you're concerned about your child's level of anxiety;
3. Don't cater to fears - make sure that you are not helping them avoid certain situations as this will enable their anxiety and unnecessarily teach them that the world is dangerous;
4. Excessive rumination (constantly thinking about the same thing) is a part of anxiety –try not to engage in this rumination. Say things like "you'll be ok", or "you can cope with this" and gently move the conversation on to a different topic;
5. Remember that distraction is a great technique to help the child stop ruminating – get them to talk about their favourite movie, their favourite sport, something exciting happening in the near future and so on;
6. Teach and model how to cope with anxiety by practicing slow breathing, or by relaxing with them in the sun;
7. Help your kids to be active, eat healthy food and to get plenty of rest;
8. Teach them to focus on realistic and rational thoughts, as opposed to thoughts that are "worst case scenario", unrealistic or irrational;
9. Give your children lots of positive praise and feedback when they do expose themselves to the anxiety provoking situation;
10. Don't forget to have fun with them!

RECOMMENDED READING

- *Helping your anxious child – a step by step guide for parents, 2nd Ed* (2008), Ronald Rapee et. al.
- *The anxiety cure for kids – a guide for parents*, (2003), Elizabeth DuPont-Spencer, Robert DuPont, Caroline DuPont.



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