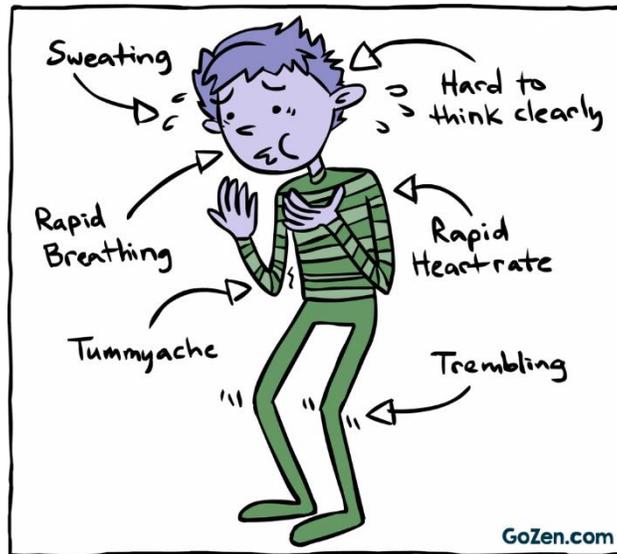


Dealing with Children's Anxieties



What we will cover.....

- Introduction
- Signs and symptoms
- School anxieties
- Dealing with general anxieties with children
- How to deal with different types of school related anxieties
- Practical tips

Introduction

Anxiety in children is a normal part of life, just as it is in adulthood. When a child is frightened, for example by a scary movie, they may have trouble getting to sleep.

Childhood anxiety occurs in about one-in-four children. However, the lifetime prevalence of a severe anxiety disorder in children is about 6%. Left untreated, anxiety in children can cause problems in school, at home and with peers as well as continue into adulthood.

The causes of anxiety in children are not fully understood, but some studies have shown that the brain of a child with anxiety behaves differently than that of an average child.

With treatment, kids with anxiety can learn to live full and happy childhoods.

Signs and symptoms

When a child suffers from general anxiety, it often affects all aspects of their life. Symptoms of anxiety in children can be seen in the way a child acts at home, school and in their social life.

General symptoms of anxiety in children include:

- Excessive anxiety and worry
- Inability to control fear or worry
- Fatigue
- Poor concentration
- Irritability
- Sleep disruption
- Restlessness
- Muscle tension

School Anxieties

School anxiety is very common. This type of anxiety typically takes one of three forms and can come from a variety of causes;

- School refusal

When a child refuses to go to school, this is typically caused by separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is only seen in children and occurs in about 4.5% of children age 7-11. This type of anxiety in school children stems from excessive worry about unreasonable harm to important figures in their lives

- Test anxiety

Test anxiety in children, is often related to a fear of failure. Childhood test anxiety can continue into adulthood and take other forms of performance anxiety. Other causes of test anxiety in school children include: Lack of preparation or a poor test history.

- Social anxiety

Also known as social phobia, can be seen at school and in other parts of child's life. Typical onset of social anxiety is 13-years-old. It is thought severe social anxiety in children may be caused due to altered serotonin pathways in the brain.

Signs and symptoms of school anxiety

The most obvious sign of school anxiety is a refusal to attend school or other events such as sleepovers. This could be due to any type of anxiety: Separation anxiety, social anxiety or test anxiety. When a child refuses to go to school repeatedly, a screening for an anxiety disorder should be conducted.

Other signs of anxiety in school children include (but are not limited to):

- Selective mutism – most occurs with social anxiety
- Low birth weight and possible intellectual disability in children under 3
- Nightmares
- Tantrums
- Older children, those age 12-16, often experience physical anxiety symptoms such as:⁴
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Lightheadedness
- Sweatiness
- Gastrointestinal symptoms such as stomachache, nausea, cramps, vomiting
- Muscle or body aches

Dealing with general anxieties in children

There are many things parents can do when dealing with anxiety in children. Reducing anxiety in children can be achieved by:

- Providing a safe and stable home life including a reliable routine
- Relaxation exercises
- Paying attention to your child's feelings
- Staying calm when the child is feeling anxious
- Praising accomplishments and not punishing for experienced anxiety
- Teaching positive coping skills and strategies
- Promoting self-esteem and self-confidence
- Learning about anxiety in children
- Using these positive coping and strength-building techniques has been clinically shown to reduce anxiety in children.
- After an incident of anxiety, it's critical to be calm and understanding. However, returning to a normal routine as soon as possible is important so as not to reinforce the anxiety symptoms. Putting an anxious child in home school is not recommended as it may prolong and make the symptoms of anxiety more severe

Dealing with social anxieties in children

- The first thing to remember is that social anxiety in children is not an indicator of bad parenting. While stress at home can add to social anxiety, no one action can cause social anxiety in a child.
- Psychologist Lynn Siqueland, PhD, specializes in treating children and adolescents with social anxiety disorder and has the following tips for parents:²
- Set expectations for an anxious child the same way you would for any other child; however, understand the pace may be slower and it may require more work to get there.
- Build your child's personal strength through praise and finding things at which they excel. Also have them do jobs around the house so they know they are contributing to the household.
- Don't continually reassure the child; let them learn by doing things on their own. Teach a child to answer his own questions and show you believe in them.
- Allow your child to feel and express their emotions, including anxiety without the fear of reprisals.
- Keep your own fears to yourself and let your child know it's safe to explore the world around them.
- Work together with other caregivers so the child gets a consistent message.
- Set limits and consequences for inappropriate behavior – don't confuse anxiety with other actions.

Dealing with school anxieties

Separation anxiety in children generally manifests as an unrealistic fear or worry about harm that may come to the primary caregivers. This can result in a refusal to spend significant amounts of time, such as nights or school days, away from caregivers or throwing tantrums before separation.

Other signs of separation anxiety disorder include:

- Reluctance to fall asleep without being near a caregiver
- Nightmares
- Homesickness
- Physical symptoms like stomach aches, dizziness and muscle aches

It's important to try to keep the child's routine as much as possible. This includes the child going to school. If a child's separation anxiety is so severe they refuse to go to school or elsewhere, slowly introducing the child to the new environment can help them see there is nothing to fear and can reinforce the positive aspects of these activities. Missing school or other events can reinforce the separation anxiety, rather than help it.

Other ways to deal with separation anxiety in children include:

- Talk with your child openly about their fears and worries; remain calm and non-judgmental
- Work with teachers, guidance counselors and others that will be caring for the child
- Take part in the child's therapy and reinforce therapeutic principles at home
- Encourage hobbies and interests to help build self-confidence
- Learn about your child's anxiety disorder
- Help build a child's support system including family, friends and others so the child feels safe and supported by many people
- Using these positive coping and strength-building techniques has been clinically shown to reduce anxiety in children.

Practical Tips

When children get a belly ache before school, here are a few things you can do:

- Talk about something fun that you are going to do after school. Distraction, but bringing a positive to “tomorrow”. Maybe you can go to the playground or out for ice cream? Maybe a bike ride or a walk with the dog?
- Talk about the funny kids in his/her class. “Did _____ do anything funny today? She’s always making everyone laugh!”
- Ask about any tests that are going to happen that week (maybe that is the reason for the stress) and how being prepared can minimize that stress.

- Ask if anyone in the class is being unkind (another cause of stress).
- Ask them “What is the worst that could happen?” If they are worried about a test- what’s the worst that can happen? They miss a question? That’s ok. We have one son that is so worried that he might talk in class and get in trouble that he worries about it. I ask him “what’s the worse that can happen? Your teacher tells you to stop? That’s ok. You’ll stop and you’ll remember to follow the rules. Not a big deal.”
- Send a picture of your family for him/her to keep in his/her pocket or bag.
- Write a note and stick it on his/her lunchbox.
- **The good news** is that it should eventually stop. Yes, it can last for a very long time or it might go through phases of it hurting or not hurting (maybe depending on what has been going on at school).
- Try, as much as possible, to listen to your child... don’t solve their problems, but just listen. Talk to friends, too- friends have the best advice and tips sometimes.

Signposting

If you feel that your child's anxiety is more than a general short term anxiety, the following agencies may be helpful;

- GP
- School Health
- Young Minds website
- NHS website
- Anxiety UK website