

Evidence-Based Practices Help Treat Children with Anxiety Disorders

What is an anxiety disorder?

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illnesses experienced by children and adolescents. They are characterized by excessive fears and worry that can cause discomfort and uneasiness that interferes with a child's well-being. Anxiety Disorders affect all areas of a child's life – school, home, work and social life. The U.S. Surgeon General's report shows that 13% of children are affected by an anxiety disorder with the average age for onset around 11 years of age.

How do I know my child has an anxiety disorder?

The most common symptoms of an anxiety disorder are physical symptoms like stomach aches, headaches and dizziness, avoidance of social situations, school refusal, many worries about everyday experiences, fear of doing things wrong, increased irritability, trouble falling or staying asleep and restlessness.

Children with anxiety disorders experience persistent, disturbing feelings that overwhelm them and disrupt their everyday lives. If you believe your child has an anxiety disorder, seek competent, professional advice or another form of support.

What are the most common anxiety disorders in children?

- Separation Anxiety Disorder – Children with separation anxiety may cling to their parent and have difficulty falling asleep by themselves at night. When separated, they may fear that their parent will be involved in an accident or taken ill, or in some other way be “lost” to the child forever. Their need to stay close to their parent or home may make it difficult for them to attend school or camp, stay at friends' houses, or be in a room by themselves. Fear of separation can lead to dizziness, nausea, or palpitations.
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – Persistent symptoms of this disorder occur after experiencing a trauma such as abuse, natural disasters, or extreme violence. Symptoms include nightmares; flashbacks; the numbing of emotions; depression; feeling angry, irritable, and distracted; and being easily startled.
- Social Phobia – Children with social phobia (also called social anxiety disorder) have a persistent fear of being embarrassed in social situations, during a performance, or if they have to speak in class or in public, get into conversation with others, or eat, drink, or write in public. Feelings of anxiety in these situations produce physical reactions: palpitations, tremors, sweating, diarrhea, blushing, muscle tension, etc. Children, however, might not recognize that their reaction is excessive, although they may be afraid that others will consider them odd or babyish.
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder – Children with generalized anxiety disorder may worry excessively about their academic performance or sporting activities, about being on time, or even about natural disasters such as earthquakes. The worry persists even when the child is not being judged and has always performed well in the past. Because of their anxiety these children may become overly conforming, perfectionist or unsure of themselves.

What do evidence-based practices suggest?

The most effective treatments for anxiety are psycho-education, cognitive therapy, relaxation, self-monitoring, attending problem solving, and exposure. The goals of the therapies are to help the child recognize their behavior and find new ways to manage their fears.

Cognitive therapy is one type of therapy that involves the young person's learning to deal with his or her fears by modifying the way he or she thinks and by practicing new behaviors.

Another therapy is called psycho-educational. In this treatment, a therapist educates the child about what behavior or symptom is causing a problem for the child. The child is then taught how the behavior can be changed.

Ultimately, parents and caregivers should learn to be understanding and patient when dealing with children with anxiety disorders. Specific plans of care can often be developed, and the child or adolescent should be involved in the decision-making process whenever possible. Each child's therapy should be individualized according to the child's illness, their symptoms and behaviors.

How can families help children cope with fear and anxiety?

Parents and caregivers can help their child or adolescent by listening and talking to them about their concerns, reassuring them that they will be safe and encouraging them to discuss what is happening around them. Let your young child ask questions. Teach them about relaxation techniques and help them develop skills for living with their worries. Remember to talk to them at their level, not using too many technical words or descriptions. Children rely on their parent's acceptance and understanding to feel secure and safe.