

Worries and anxieties: helping children to cope

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) which can affect children and young people. This factsheet describes the different types of anxieties that children might feel and some of the reasons behind these. It also offers practical advice on how to deal with these worries and anxieties.



Introduction

Children, like adults, have all sorts of strong feelings about what is happening to them. At times, the world around them can seem frightening or uncertain. It's natural for them to feel fearful or worried.

Growing up: different types of anxiety

Fears and phobias

Very young children often develop fears and phobias. These usually happen in particular situations, such as going to nursery or settling down at night, and can result from the fear of separation from parents or familiar adults. Sometimes, the anxieties are set off by particular things such as dogs, spiders or snakes. Fears like this are very common in early childhood, but with some encouragement and support, most children learn to overcome their anxiety.

General anxiety

Some youngsters feel anxious most of the time for no apparent reason. It may be part of their temperament, or it may be part of a pattern of behaviour that is shared with other members of the family. If the anxiety becomes very severe, it can interfere with the child's ability to go to school, to concentrate and learn, and to be confident with others.

School-related anxiety

Refusing to go to school can also be caused by anxiety. However, worries about going to school can be caused by a number of things (see Factsheet 9 about children who don't go to school). It is always worth trying to find out what

could be causing the problem. Anxiety about separation from their parents is common in young children transferring to secondary school. Fear of bullying, or problems with friendships, are also common. Trouble with school work or with teachers may also play a part.

What are the signs?

- Feeling fearful or panicky
- Feeling breathless, sweaty, or complaining of 'butterflies' or pains in the chest or stomach
- Feeling tense, fidgety, using the toilet often.

These symptoms may come and go. Young children can't tell you that they are anxious. They become irritable, tearful and clingy, have difficulty sleeping, and can wake in the night or have bad dreams. Anxiety can even cause a child to develop a stomach-ache or to feel sick.

What causes these worries and anxieties?

Family problems

Young children feel insecure when they hear their parents arguing or fighting. They may hear or see things that they don't understand or that make them feel unsafe.

Divorce or separation

This is usually painful for children and they often have divided loyalties (see Factsheet 14 on divorce or separation of parents).

Death or illness of a parent or close relative

Losing someone close makes a child feel insecure and upset, especially if they are too young to understand. Illness or death may upset the child's normal daily life (see Factsheet 15 on death in the family and Factsheet 16 on parental mental illness).

Sources of further information

- The Mental Health Foundation produces a booklet *The Anxious Child*. 7th Floor, 20–21 Cornwall Terrace, London NW1 4QL or 83 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0HW; tel: 020 7802 0300; website www.mentalhealth.org.uk.
- Parentline offers help and advice to parents on bringing up children and teenagers. Helpline 0808 800 2222; textphone 0800783 6783; www.parentlineplus.org.uk.
- Youth Access offers information, advice and counselling in the UK. 19 Taylor's Yard, 67 Alderbrook Road, London SW12 8AB; tel: 020 8772 9900.
- The YoungMinds Parents' Information Service provides information and advice on child mental health issues. 102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA; Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2138; www.youngminds.org.uk.
Or check out these websites:
www.childanxiety.net
www.social-anxiety.org
www.phobics-society.org.uk
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel: 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax: 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

Discipline that is harsh, inconsistent or overprotective

This leaves children feeling unsupported, insecure and lacking in confidence (see Factsheet 2 on good parenting).

School problems

Children who are bullied, lack friends or have trouble with their school work often worry a lot (see Factsheet 18 on bullying).

Traumatic experiences

Children who have experienced a household fire or burglary, a road traffic accident or some other frightening or traumatic event might suffer from anxiety afterwards. They might also develop post-traumatic stress disorder (see Factsheet 20 on trauma).

Do children grow out of it?

Most do, but a few children continue being anxious as adults. However, anxiety can limit a youngster's activities, which can affect them in the long-term. Not going to school, for example, means missing out on education and on making

friends. Loneliness and lack of confidence can be long-term problems. The emotional effects of traumatic experience can also be long-lasting.

Where can I get help?

A lot can be done to stop children being anxious. Parents and teachers can help by remembering that children, like adults, may get anxious about sudden change:

- It helps if you can prepare them in advance and explain what is going to happen and why.
- Regular routines around bedtime and getting ready for school can help very young children with separation anxiety.
- There may be books or games that can help children to understand upsetting things, such as serious illness, separation or bereavement.
- Children over the age of five often find it helpful to talk about their worries to an understanding adult.
- They may need comfort, reassurance and practical help with how to cope.

If your child is showing signs of anxiety, it is important that you can show them that you care and want to understand the reason why:

- Think about whether there is something going on in the family that could be causing worry.
- Are they picking up on your own worry?
- Is something happening at school or with friends?

All families have times when they have to deal with a lot of stress and worry. At times like these, you or your child might need extra help and support from friends, family members or others.

If your child is so anxious that they can't cope with ordinary day-to-day life, more specialist help is needed. Your general practitioner will be able to advise you, and may suggest referral to the local child and adolescent mental health service. The type of specialist help offered here will depend on what is causing the anxiety. Basically, it will involve finding ways of overcoming the worries and building confidence step by step.

References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.