

KIDS Issues

Story thanks to
Jutta Dempsey

ANXIETY

Anxiety is one of the most common disorders of childhood with half of all children being affected at some point but the fact that it can come in many different disguises causes parents to be baffled by their child's behavior, writes Jutta Dempsey.

Does your child have some of the following?

- Avoids doing things that they used to enjoy
- Has sleep problems, including taking a long time to fall asleep, nightmares etc.
- Needs constant reassurance – "you can do it", "come on – you will enjoy it".
- Physical aches and pains or feeling sick, including butterflies in the stomach
- Needing things to be right or perfect (will tear up a drawing that they are not happy with)
- Will not take risks, including difficulty in joining in with social activities

Although there are many different types of anxiety, the most common in childhood is Generalized Anxiety Disorder. We tend to think that anxious children will be shy and clingy, which they often are, but anxiety can present in all sorts of other ways too which can make it difficult to identify.

The shy clingy type of child who internalizes anxious feelings is relatively easy to identify and they are also easier to help as they will usually take steps to try to cope. However they are often more difficult for teachers to identify at school as they try to do things perfectly and try to please.

Other children will externalise their anxiety as defiant and controlling behaviour. These children often take their feelings of not being able to cope out on others, such as one or both of their parents or siblings. They may throw tantrums when expected to do things that are too challenging for them to do easily or think that they cannot do.

The anger may be passive defiance or aggressive. And it is difficult for a parent to look underneath this child's anger to find that its source is in fact a vulnerable child with a fear of failure. It is even more difficult for the teacher who has various personalities in a classroom and may not notice the 'spark' as easily.

An anxious child may fear taking any risks that could expose their inability to do something to their own high expectation. Getting 8 out of 10 may just not be good enough for them. This is then magnified in social situations such as a classroom or sporting field. They may try and

avoid having their perceived failings exposed by pretending they're not interested or that they are "too cool to try". Behaviour problems may result from this avoidance.

Anxiety may also show up as obsessions, compulsions, panic, social anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress. PTSD is often a result of significant events such as a car accident or loss of a family member.

So anxiety has many forms in children and parents need to look for the source rather than just the behaviour to fully identify this hidden disorder. Keep a diary of what happens before the difficult behaviours as this may help identify triggers, as well as noticing signs of anxiety and coping mechanisms in the extended family.

When anxiety becomes part of a child's life for a long period of time they may become moody as life just becomes too hard and exhausting. This is prevalent from pre-adolescence and is often misinterpreted as teenage rebellion or laziness. The statistics show that in over 80% of cases of depression, anxiety is also present. Childhood anxiety is also a leading indicator of adolescent depression.

There are many treatments available for anxiety which not only reduces the anxiety and increases the ability to function to potential, but also helps prevent anxiety and depression at later ages. With over 20% of Australians suffering from a mental disorder, early detection and treatment is imperative.

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Treatment options

- School based social and emotional learning programs that build resiliency and coping strategies
- Psychological treatments that teach children to reduce avoidance and use more effective coping strategies. These may include learning how to replace unhelpful thoughts with helpful self-talk (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) and relaxation skills.
- Parents can learn techniques to incorporate into the family at home to encourage alternative coping strategies and different role modeling
- There are many books available at libraries and on line to teach beliefs that a child can use to challenge their own thoughts about themselves.
- Medication may sometimes help in severe cases whilst the child learns new ways of coping.