

SEND Bulletin NO. 15



Anxiety in Children

Just like adults, children and young people feel worried and anxious at times. But if your child's anxiety is starting to affect their wellbeing, they may need some help to overcome it.

What makes children anxious?

Children tend to feel anxious about different things at different ages. Many of these worries are a normal part of growing up.

From about eight months to three years, for example, it's very common for young children to have something called separation anxiety. They may become clingy and cry when separated from their parents or carers. This is a normal stage in children's development and tends to ease off at around age two to three.

It's also common for pre-school children to develop specific fears or phobias. Common fears in early childhood include animals, insects, storms, heights, water, blood, and the dark. These fears usually go away gradually on their own.

Throughout a child's life there will be other times when they feel anxiety. Lots of children feel anxious when going to a new school, for example, or before tests and exams. Some children feel shy in social situations and may need support with this.

When is anxiety a problem for children?

Anxiety becomes a problem for children when it starts to get in the way of their day-to-day life. We all get anxious at times, but some children seem to live a life of anxiety, where it's not short-term and it's not just an occasional thing. If you go into any school at exam time all the students will be anxious but some may be so anxious that they don't get into school that morning. Some will sit in an exam and their mind freezes and they can't get anything down on paper. This is when anxiety starts to interfere with what children need to do or would like to do in everyday life.

Severe anxiety like this can harm children's mental and emotional wellbeing, affecting their self-esteem and confidence. They may become withdrawn and go to great lengths to avoid things or situations that make them feel anxious.

What are the signs of anxiety in children?

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. You may notice that they become irritable, tearful and clingy or have difficulty sleeping.

In older children you may notice that they:

- lack the confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems with sleeping or eating
- are prone to angry outbursts
- have negative thoughts going round and round their head, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public or attending school

How to help your anxious child

If a child is experiencing anxiety, there is plenty that adults, parents and carers can do to help.

First and foremost, it's important to talk to the child about their anxiety or worries. Reassure them and show them you understand how they feel. If the child is old enough, it may help to explain what anxiety is and the physical effects it has on our bodies. It may be helpful to describe anxiety as being like a wave that builds up and then ebbs away again.

As well as talking to the child about their worries and anxieties, it's important to help them find solutions. No one likes to see a child anxious and the tendency is to say, if you're worried about that sleepover, don't go. But what you're doing is saying, if you get anxious about something, it means you can't do it.

It's more helpful to say, 'I hear that you're worried about this. What can you/we do that's going to help?' Focus on exploring solutions with the child, instead of just rehearsing their worries and talking about all the things that could go wrong. Acknowledge the child's worries, but then help them plan ways to cope with them.

With younger children you can work together to develop these skills and strategies. But as children get older they have to learn these skills and strategies themselves. People can't be there to sort them out all of the time.

Other ways to ease anxiety in children

- Teach the child to recognise signs of anxiety in themselves and to ask for help when it strikes.
- Children of all ages find regular routines reassuring so, if the child is feeling anxious, try to stick to regular daily routines where possible.
- If the child is anxious because of distressing events, such as a bereavement or separation, see if you can find books or films that will help them understand their feelings.
- If you know a change, such as a house move is coming up, prepare the child by talking to them about what is going to happen and why.
- Try not to become anxious yourself or overprotective – rather than doing things for the child or helping them to avoid anxiety provoking situations, encourage the child to find ways to manage them.
- Practice simple relaxation techniques with the child, such as taking three deep, slow breaths, breathing in for a count of three and out for three. You'll find more relaxation techniques for children on the Moodcafe website.
- Distraction can be helpful for young children. For example, if they are anxious about going to nursery, play games on the way there, such as seeing who can spot the most red cars. This is a way of focusing attention away from internal anxiety cues and worries to external, more neutral anxiety-reducing things.
- Turn an old tissue box into a 'worry' box. Get the child to write down or draw their worries and post them into the box. Then you can sort through the box together at the end of the day or week.

Useful Websites:

- www.youngminds.org.uk/for_parents/
- www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/.../worriesandanxieties
- www.worrywisekids.org/
- If you have any interesting information or resources which you would like to share with your colleagues via this fortnightly bulletin please e-mail them to me. ari@st-peters.bournemouth.sch.uk

Many thanks
Anne