

# Anxiety in Children

## Guide for Parents and Carers

### What Is Anxiety?

(The following information and advice is taken from the NHS website.)

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear that can be mild or severe. Everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their life – for example, you may feel worried and anxious about sitting an exam or a test. During times like these, feeling anxious can be perfectly normal. However, some people find it hard to control their worries. Their feelings of anxiety are more constant and can often affect their daily lives.

### What Might Make Children Feel Anxious?

There are certain common causes of anxiety in children. Children may feel anxious about meeting new people, certain experiences and even animals. These causes of anxiety are common and will pass with time. Some children may also develop anxiety about specific events such as tests or public speaking occasions. The causes of anxiety will be different from person to person. It is important to remember that what seems very easy to one person, might feel very daunting and anxiety provoking to another. It is also important to remember that it is natural to feel anxious; everyone experiences anxiety at certain times.

### When Is It a Problem?

Anxiety becomes a problem when it begins to interfere with a person's day-to-day life. Feeling anxious about a specific event is quite normal and these feelings should pass as the event comes and goes. If someone is feeling a strong degree of anxiety on a regular basis this may then begin to affect their social and emotional wellbeing which can have detrimental effects on their confidence and self-esteem. Signs that anxiety is causing a significant amount of distress may include the following:

- **Avoidance** – this is when someone actively avoids a situation that they know will cause them to feel anxious.
- **Outbursts of anger or emotion** – these may be caused when someone feels anxious about a certain situation.
- **Disturbed sleep** – this can happen when people find it hard to take their mind off the event that is causing anxiety.
- **Becoming withdrawn** – a person suffering from strong levels of anxiety may feel very preoccupied with the situation they are concerned about and may therefore find it difficult to engage with other activities.

## What Are the Signs of Anxiety in Children?

(The following information and advice is taken from the NHS website.)

**When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. You may notice that they:**

- become irritable, tearful or clingy;
- have difficulty sleeping;
- wake in the night;
- may begin wetting the bed at night;
- have bad dreams.

**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 Can You Help?

If your child is suffering from anxiety, it is very important to talk to them about it. Let them know these are feelings that are very normal, reassure them and explain you will listen and support them when needed. If appropriate, it may be helpful to discuss some of the physical symptoms of anxiety to help your child understand what is happening when they feel particularly anxious.

It is useful in the long term to support your child to develop strategies to overcome their anxieties. The following are strategies you can discuss with your child to help them ease the feelings of anxiety over a certain event:

- **Relaxation Breathing** - Encourage your child to take some deep breaths and release them slowly, suggest they breathe in to a count of four and out for the same count or encourage children to imagine blowing out a candle, counting the breaths each time.

- **Mindfulness** - Encourage children to concentrate on the present moment by identifying what their senses are experiencing. Through mindfulness a child's attention can be directed away from the situation they are feeling anxious about. Ask children to think about what they can hear, what they can see and what they can feel.

- **Safe Space** - Encourage your child to find a calm, quiet space they can go to during times of anxiety. This space can be discussed and agreed with other supporting adults and can be used to indicate to them that your child is feeling a wave of anxiety.

- **Writing Worries** - Some children might find it helpful to write down the concerns that are causing them to feel anxious. This way, your child might feel less worry and feel more able to relax and maintain their calm. If they are comfortable to, you can discuss these and encourage them to discuss what they are worried about with each situation. During this time, remember that different things worry different people.

- **Spot the Signs** - Encourage children to identify the warning signs when they feel a wave of anxiety is approaching. If they are able to identify the early signs, encourage them to use some of the relaxation strategies already discussed.

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