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Anxiety in Children

Typical vs. Atypical Anxiety in Children

- The difference between normal worry and an anxiety disorder is severity. Although feeling anxious is a natural reaction to a stressful or dangerous situation, a child may need help if his or her anxiety is out of proportion, if it persists, or if it interferes with his or her life and healthy development.
 - The Child Mind Institute

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What does normal anxiety look like?

Some fears and worries are normal for elementary school children and expected

- Not wanting to go to school at the beginning of the year or after a long break – winter, summer, etc.
- Separation anxiety- Typically resolves in children by the end of kindergarten
- They may fear new and unfamiliar situations- real or imagined
 - While trying to master fears of what could be they may struggle with the dark, the basement, closets, and under the bed.
 - They may fear dogs, spiders, or ghosts

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Signs your child may be anxious

Signs your child may be anxious

- Anxiety lasting for weeks or months may cause physical symptoms. Some of these symptoms include headaches, stomachaches, nausea, vomiting, difficulty sleeping. Your child not wanting to leave their comfort zone, crying often, tantrums and clinginess are common.
- Anxiety can also be evident when issues are found with a child's concentration and decision-making. Thoughts tend to be unrealistic, catastrophic and pessimistic. It is common for an anxious child to need excessive reassurance, but the benefits of the reassurance is short lived.
- Irritability or anger are also signs for anxiety. A child with anxiety may become frustrated or overwhelmed due to the constant worrying, or exhausted from lack of sleep.

Other possible signs of anxiety

- Rapid heartbeat
- Difficulty breathing
- Sweaty or shaky hands or feet
- Silence and refusal to speak
- Sudden changes in eating habits
- Mood swings
- Wanting to stay home or with parents all the time
- Wanting to avoid social activities or school
- Panic attacks and fainting
- Sleep disturbances (e.g. nightmares, insomnia)
- Irritability and restlessness
- Sudden changes in grades
- Low self-esteem (e.g. saying negative things about themselves)

Ways children often communicate their anxiety

- "What's wrong with me?" (expression of self doubt)
- "I'm tired." (always appear worn out)
- "I have a headache." Or "Don't make me." (excuses or may look like laziness)
- "I'm sorry." (apologizing constantly)
- "Can't we stay home?" (prefers to stay in a quiet familiar environment)
- "You do it." Or "I don't want to." (may avoid most minimal interactions)
- "Is it time to leave yet." Or "I want to go home." (not wanting to be around others for long)
- "I don't feel well." (complaints about body aches, or making her/himself sick)

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What can parents do?

What can you, as a parent, do to help?

- 1. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.**
- 2. Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious.**
- 3. Express positive- but realistic- expectations.**
- 4. Respect their feelings, but don't empower them.**
- 5. Don't ask leading questions.**
- 6. Don't reinforce the child's fears.**
- 7. Encourage the child to tolerate anxiety.**
- 8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.**
- 9. Think things through with the child.**
- 10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.**

Treatment options

- Individual or family therapy- Your child can learn the coping skills needed to work through anxiety. The therapist can help you, as a family, identify where the anxiety may be coming from and give you different strategies and interventions to alleviate the anxiety.
- Group therapy- Children functioning in a group setting with peers of the same age range suffering from anxiety typically role play, draw, craft, and have structured or unstructured play. They are usually taught different coping skills, social skills, and work toward increasing self esteem.

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School support

How to help in the classroom

Anxiety does not necessarily impact a child's academic abilities, but it can affect their ability to learn.

- **Create a “safe” place for the child to go when anxiety symptoms are high.**
- **Be aware of physical symptoms of anxiety and provide activities to distract the child.**
- **Allow a few minutes at the beginning of the day for the child to transition into the school day.**
- **Talk to the student about what interventions they would find helpful.**
- **Teach the child relaxation techniques they can do at school, such as deep breathing exercise**
- **Reward effort by a student with anxiety.**
- **Create group activities that role-play appropriate behaviors.**
- **Discuss alternative ways of handling situations.**
- **Find books that address children with anxiety.**
- **Teach positive self-talk to the entire class.**
- **Post the daily routine in the classroom and let students know in advance any changes in the schedule.**
- **Help students break assignments down into smaller segments.**
- **Play soothing music during down time.**
- **Incorporate exercise into the school day.**



Crisis situations

Student safety

- Recent and previous school shootings have evoked many emotions—sadness, grief, helplessness, anxiety, and anger. Children who are struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images of the shooting may turn to trusted adults for help and guidance.
- The goals of school staff after a crisis are to reestablish a sense of safety and restore the learning environment within the school setting. Both parents and school staff have a role in making sure the children understand the tragedy and ensuring that they again, feel safe.

Common reactions in children and teens

- Problems paying attention and concentrating
- Irritable or defiant
- Separation anxiety
- Anxious
- Sleep and appetite routines may change

What parents can do

- Start the conversation
- Turn off the news
- Try to keep routines as normal as possible
- Ask your child what they already know about the event
- Correct any inaccurate information
- Listen to fears and concerns

Each child is unique. If your child is having any difficulties after experiencing, seeing or hearing about a traumatic event there is help available in your area.

Center for Traumatic Stress at Allegheny General Hospital
412-362-8677

Outreach Teen and Family Services, Inc. 666 Washington Rd,
Pittsburgh, PA 15228, 412-561-5405

Southwestern Human Services 110 Fort Couch Rd., 2nd Floor,
Pittsburgh PA 15214 412-831-8211

School support

- Counselors are available at all schools for supportive school counseling
- Counselors and administrators have community mental health referral sources
- Mt. Lebanon School District Resource Page
 - School safety and violence
 - Discrimination and bias
 - Bullying

Information gathered from

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.NCTSN.org
- Mt Lebanon School District: Parent Resources: <https://www.mtlsd.org/page.cfm?p=1545>
- Quinn, H. (2017). 14 Phrases Kids Said That Were Code Words for 'I'm Anxious.
- Healthy Holistic Living – Anxiety in Children
- Nimh.nih.gov. (2017). Any Anxiety Disorder Among Children.
- Kidshealth.org. (2017). Anxiety Disorders.
- Adaa.org. (2017). Childhood Anxiety Disorders | Anxiety and Depression Association of America, ADAA.
- Childmind.org. (2017). The Child Mind Institute. Anxiety Center.
- Healthcentral.com. 20 Classroom Interventions for Children with Anxiety Disorders.