

# How Does Anxiety Affect Kids in School?

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 [childmind.org/article/classroom-anxiety-in-children](https://childmind.org/article/classroom-anxiety-in-children)

What it looks like, and why it's often mistaken for something else

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Sometimes anxiety is easy to identify — like when a child is feeling nervous before a test at school. Other times anxiety in the classroom can look like something else entirely — an upset stomach, disruptive or angry behavior, *ADHD*,

or even a [learning disorder](#).

There are many different kinds of anxiety, which is one of the reasons it can be hard to detect in the classroom. What they all have in common, says neurologist and former teacher Ken Schuster, PsyD, is that anxiety “tends to lock up the brain,” making school hard for anxious kids.

Children can struggle with:

- **Separation anxiety:** When children are [worried about being separated from caregivers](#). These kids can have a hard time at school drop-offs and throughout the day.
- **Social anxiety:** When children are [excessively self-conscious](#), making it difficult for them to participate in class and socialize with peers.
- **Selective mutism:** When children have a [hard time speaking in some settings](#), like at school around the teacher.
- **Generalized anxiety:** When children worry about a wide variety of everyday things. Kids with generalized anxiety often worry particularly about school performance and can struggle with perfectionism.

- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder:** When children’s minds are filled with unwanted and stressful thoughts. Kids with OCD try to alleviate their anxiety by performing compulsive rituals like counting or washing their hands.
- **Specific phobias:** When children have an excessive and irrational fear of particular things, like being afraid of animals or storms.

Here are some tips for recognizing anxiety in kids at school, and what might be causing it.

## **Inattention and restlessness**

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When a child is squirming in his seat and not paying attention, we tend to think of ADHD, but anxiety could also be the cause. When kids are anxious in the classroom, they might have a hard time focusing on the lesson and ignoring the worried thoughts overtaking their brains. “Some kids might appear really ‘on’ at one point but then they can suddenly drift away, depending on what they’re feeling anxious about,” says Dr. Schuster. “That looks like inattention, and it is, but it’s triggered by anxiety.”

## **Attendance problems and clingy kids**

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It might look like truancy, but for kids for whom school is a big source of anxiety, refusing to go to school is also pretty common. School refusal rates tend to be higher after vacations or sick days, because kids have a harder time coming back after a few days away.

Going to school can also be a problem for kids who have trouble separating from their parents. Some amount of separation anxiety is normal, but when kids don’t adjust to separation over time and their anxiety makes going to school difficult or even impossible, it becomes a real problem. Kids with separation anxiety may also feel compelled to use their phones throughout the day to check in with their parents.

## **Disruptive behavior**

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Acting out is another thing we might not associate with anxiety. But when a student is compulsively kicking the chair of the kid in front of him, or throws a tantrum whenever the schedule is ignored or a classmate isn’t following the rules, anxiety may well be the cause. Similarly, kids who are feeling anxious might ask a lot of questions, including repetitive ones, because they are feeling worried and want reassurance.

Anxiety can also make kids aggressive. When children are feeling upset or threatened and don’t know how to handle their feelings, their fight or flight response to protect themselves can kick in — and some kids are more likely to fight. They might attack

another child or a teacher, throw things, or push over a desk because they're feeling out of control.

## **Trouble answering questions in class**

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Sometimes kids will do perfectly well on tests and homework, but when they're called on in class teachers hit a wall. There are several different reasons why this might happen.

"Back when I was teaching, I would notice that when I had to call on someone, or had to figure out who's turn it was to speak, it was like the anxious kid always tended to disappear," says Dr. Schuster. "The eager child is making eye contact, they're giving you some kind of physical presence in the room like 'Call on me, call on me!' " But when kids are anxious about answering questions in class, "they're going to break eye contact, they might look down, they might start writing something even though they're not really writing something. They're trying to break the connection with the teacher in order to avoid what's making them feel anxious."

If they do get called on, sometimes kids get so anxious that they freeze. They might have been paying attention to the lesson and they might even know the answer, but when they're called on their anxiety level becomes so heightened that they can't respond.

## **Frequent trips to the nurse**

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Anxiety can manifest in physical complaints, too. If a student is having unexplained headaches, nausea, stomachaches, or even vomiting, those could be symptoms of anxiety. So can a racing heart, sweaty palms, tense muscles, and being out of breath.

## **Problems in certain subjects**

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When a child starts doubting her abilities in a subject, anxiety can become a factor that gets in the way of her learning or showing what she knows. Sometimes this can be mistaken for a learning disorder when it's really just anxiety.

However anxiety can also go hand in hand with learning disorders. When kids start noticing that something is harder for them than the other kids, and that they are falling behind, they can understandably get anxious. The period before *a learning disorder* is diagnosed can be particularly stressful for kids.

## **Not turning in homework**

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When a student doesn't turn in her homework, it could be because she didn't do it, but it could also be because she is worried that it isn't good enough. Likewise, anxiety can lead to second guessing — an anxious child might erase his work over and over until there's a hole in the paper — and spending so much time on something that it never gets finished. We tend to think of perfectionism as a good thing, but when children are overly self-critical it can sabotage even the things they are trying their hardest at, like school work.

You might also notice that some anxious kids will start worrying about tests much earlier than their classmates and may begin dreading certain assignments, subjects, or even school itself.

## **Avoiding socializing or group work**

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Some kids will avoid or even refuse to participate in the things that make them anxious. This includes obvious anxiety triggers like giving presentations, but also things like gym class, eating in the cafeteria, and doing group work.

When kids start skipping things it might look to their teachers and peers like they are uninterested or underachieving, but the opposite might be true. Sometimes kids avoid things because they are afraid of making a mistake or being judged.

Dr. Schuster notes that when kids get anxious in social situations, sometimes they have a much easier time showing what they know when teachers engage them one-to-one, away from the group.

This article was last reviewed or updated on January 19, 2023.

# What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

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 [childmind.org/article/what-to-do-and-not-do-when-children-are-anxious](https://childmind.org/article/what-to-do-and-not-do-when-children-are-anxious)

How to respect feelings without empowering fears

Writer: [Clark Goldstein, PhD](#)

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When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning parents, not wanting a child to suffer, can actually make the youngster's anxiety worse. It happens when parents try to protect kids from their fears. Here are pointers for helping children escape the cycle of anxiety.

## **1. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.**

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None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety isn't to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It's to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they're anxious. And as a byproduct of that, the anxiety will decrease over time.

## **2. Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious.**

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Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. Let's say a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset and starts to cry — not to be manipulative, but just because that's how they feel. If their parents whisk them out of there, or remove the thing they're afraid of, the child has learned that coping mechanism. And that cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

## **3. Express positive — but realistic — expectations.**

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You can't promise a child that their fears are unrealistic—that they won't fail a test, that they'll have fun ice skating, or that another child won't laugh at them during show & tell. But you can express confidence that they're going to be okay, that they will be able to manage it. And you can let them know that as they face those fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives them confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you're not going to ask them to do something they can't handle.

#### **4. Respect their feelings, but don't empower them.**

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It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. So if a child is terrified about going to the doctor because they're due for a shot, you don't want to belittle those fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic, help them understand what they're anxious about, and encourage them to feel that they can face their fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

#### **5. Don't ask leading questions.**

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Encourage your child to talk about their feelings, but try not to ask leading questions—"Are you anxious about the big test? Are you worried about the science fair?" To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: "How are you feeling about the science fair?"

#### **6. Don't reinforce the child's fears.**

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What you don't want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: "Maybe this *is* something that you should be afraid of." Let's say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time they're around a dog, you might be anxious about how they will respond, and you might unintentionally send a message that they *should*, indeed, be worried.

#### **7. Encourage the child to tolerate their anxiety.**

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Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what they want or need to do. It's really encouraging them to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the "habituation curve." That means that it will drop over time as he continues to have contact with the *stressor*.

It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that's how we get over our fears.

#### **8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.**

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When we're afraid of something, the hardest time is really *before* we do it. So another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory period. If a child is nervous about going to a doctor's appointment, you don't want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go; that's likely to get your child more keyed up. So just try to shorten that period to a minimum.

## **9. Think things through with the child.**

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Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true—how would they handle it? A child who's anxious about separating from their parents might worry about what would happen if a parent didn't come to pick them up. So we talk about that. If your mom doesn't come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? "Well I would tell the coach my mom's not here." And what do you think the coach would do? "Well he would call my mom. Or he would wait with me." A child who's afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick them up can have a code word from their parents that anyone they sent would know. For some kids, having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

## **10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.**

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There are multiple ways you can help kids handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Kids are perceptive, and they're going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you can't handle the stress or the anxiety. I'm not saying to pretend that you don't have stress and anxiety, but let kids hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.

This article was last reviewed or updated on February 23, 2023.

# Resources for Parents of Children with Anxiety Disorders

## WEBSITES

- The Child Anxiety Network: [www.childanxiety.net](http://www.childanxiety.net)
- WorryWise Kids: [www.worrywisekids.org](http://www.worrywisekids.org)
- Temple University's Child and Adolescent Anxiety Disorders Clinic: [www.childanxiety.org](http://www.childanxiety.org)
- UCLA Child and Adolescent OCD, Anxiety, and Tic Disorders Program: [www.npi.ucla.edu/caap/](http://www.npi.ucla.edu/caap/)
- New York University Child Study Center: [www.aboutourkids.org](http://www.aboutourkids.org)
- Massachusetts General Hospital School Psychiatry Program and MADI Resource Center: [www.massgeneral.org/schoolpsychiatry/info\\_anxiety.asp](http://www.massgeneral.org/schoolpsychiatry/info_anxiety.asp)
- Anxiety Disorders Association of America: [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)
- The Center for Mental Health Services: [www.mentalhealth.org](http://www.mentalhealth.org)
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)
- Academy of Cognitive Therapy: [www.academyofct.org](http://www.academyofct.org)
- Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies: [www.abct.org](http://www.abct.org)
- Pamela Rand's YoGuides: [www.yoguides.com](http://www.yoguides.com)

## BOOKS FOR KIDS

- Dutro, J. & Boyle, K. (1991). *Night light: A story for children afraid of the dark*. Magination Press, 3-7 yrs. (bedtime fears)
- Marcus, I. & Marcus, P. (1991). *Scary night visitors: A story for children with bedtime fears*. Magination Press, 3-7 yrs. (bedtime fears)
- Lite, L. (2007). *Goodnight caterpillar*. LiteBooks.net, 4-8 yrs. (relaxation)
- Lite, L. (2007). *A boy and a turtle*. LiteBooks.net (relaxation)
- Sisemore, T. (2008). *I bet I won't fret: A workbook to help children with Generalized Anxiety Disorders*. Instant Help Books, 9-12 yrs. (generalized anxiety)
- Thomson, T. (2002). *Worry Wart Wes*. Savor Publishing House, 4-8 yrs. (generalized anxiety)
- Schaefer, C. & Friedman, J. (1992). *Cat's got your tongue: A story for children afraid to speak*. Magination Press, 4-8 yrs. (selective mutism)
- Shipon-Blum, E. (2003). *Understanding Katie*. Selective Mutism Anxiety Research and Treatment Center, 4-8 yrs. (selective mutism)
- Voerg, K. & Pando, N. (2005). *I don't want to go to school: Helping children cope with separation anxiety*. New Horizon, 4-8 yrs.
- Viorst, J. & Choro, K. (1992). *The good-bye book*. Alladin, 4-8 yrs. (separation anxiety)
- Niner, H. & Swearingen, G. (2004). *Mr. Worry: A story about OCD*. Albert Whitman & Co., 4-8 yrs. (OCD)
- Wagner, A. P. & Jutton, P. A. (2004) *Up and down the worry hill*. Lighthouse Press, 9-12 yrs. (OCD).
- Holmes, M. & Mudlaff, S. (2000). *A terrible thing happened: A story for children who have witnessed violence or trauma*. Magination Press, 4-8 yrs. (post-traumatic stress disorder)

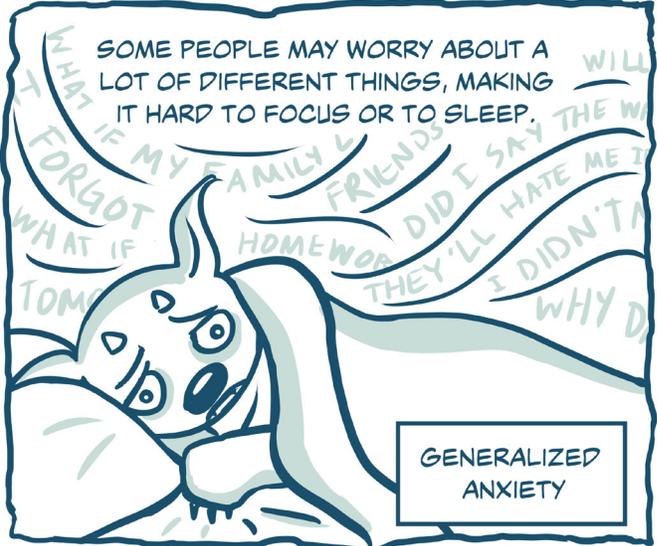
# Resources for Parents of Children with Anxiety Disorders

## BOOKS FOR PARENTS

- Chansky, T. E. (2001). *Freeing your child from obsessive-compulsive disorder: A powerful, practical program for parents of children and adolescents*. Crown Publishing Group.
- Chansky, T. E. (2004). *Freeing your child from anxiety: Powerful, practical solutions to overcome your child's fears, worries, and phobias*. Broadway Books.
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- Crist, J. (2004). *What to do when you are scared and worried: A guide for kids*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.
- Dacey, J. S., & Fiore, L. B. (2000). *Your anxious child: How parents and teachers can relieve anxiety in children*. Jossey-Bass.
- Eisen, A. & Engler, L. (2006). *Helping your child overcome separation anxiety or school refusal*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Manassis, K. (1996). *Keys to parenting your anxious child*. Barron's Educational Series, Inc
- Rapee, R. M., Spence, S., Cobham, V., & Wignall, A. (2000). *Helping your anxious child: A step-by-step guide for parents*. New Harbinger

# ANXIETY

IS WHEN PEOPLE WORRY SO MUCH THAT IT CAUSES PROBLEMS IN THEIR LIVES.



GENERALIZED ANXIETY

SOME KIDS WITH ANXIETY ARE SCARED TO LEAVE THE GROWN-UPS WHO TAKE CARE OF THEM, BECAUSE THEY THINK SOMETHING BAD WILL HAPPEN TO THEM.



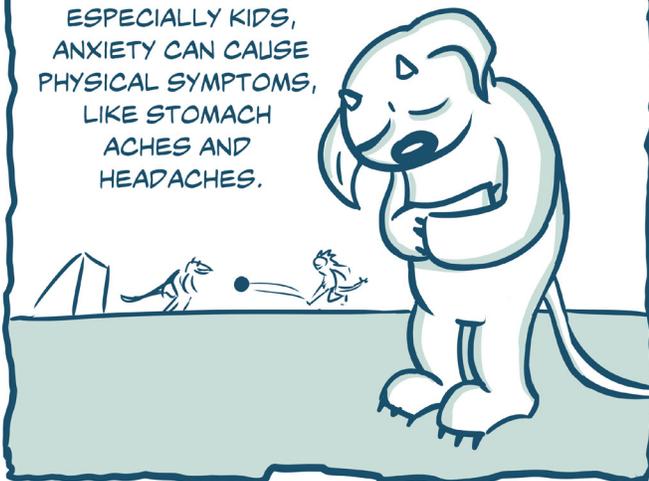
SEPARATION ANXIETY

OTHERS MAY BE AFRAID TO TALK TO OTHER PEOPLE BECAUSE THEY WORRY THEY MIGHT LOOK SILLY OR NOT KNOW WHAT TO SAY.



SOCIAL ANXIETY

IN SOME PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY KIDS, ANXIETY CAN CAUSE PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS, LIKE STOMACH ACHES AND HEADACHES.



TREATMENT CAN HELP PEOPLE LEARN SKILLS TO MANAGE THEIR ANXIETY, SO THEY CAN STILL DO ALL THE THINGS THEY WANT TO DO.

