ASHLAND'S DAET
DECISIONS AT EVERY TURN COALITION

Parenting for Prevention: Anxiety

Not All Anxiety is Bad

All children experience anxiety. Anxiety is a normal response to a new, difficult, or stressful situation. Many common childhood fears or worries are developmentally appropriate and emerge during different life stages. Developmentally appropriate fears or worries subside over time.

TYPICAL FEARS BY AGE	
Infants & Todlers	Separation from caregivers, strangers, loud noises
2-3 years	Animals, darkness, thunder & lightning, fire, water
4-5 years	Bugs, getting lost, monsters, death
5-7	Germs/illness, natural disasters, school
7-12	Performance anxiety, social situations, burglars, war

Parents and other caring adults can help a child manage his/her anxiety by acknowledging the specific fear (dogs, catching the flu, math tests) to better understand situations that are worrisome to the child. Do not pressure a child to feel a certain way – children need to be able to express their true emotions. Other ways adults can help a child:

- The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it
- Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious
- Express positive—but realistic—expectations
- Respect her feelings, but don't empower them
- Don't ask leading questions
- Don't reinforce the child's fears
- Encourage the child to tolerate her anxiety
- Try to keep the anticipatory period short
- Think things through with the child
- Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety

What Parents Need to Know

Why the increase in child and teen anxiety?

While every family's experiences and circumstances s are unique, societal and cultural shifts over the past few decades - and parent responses to these global shifts - have been cited as possible contributors to the rise in childhood stress. Our culture's emphasis on happiness sends the message to children & teens that it is not OK to feel sad or upset. Parents rush in to make their child feel happy at all times and do not allow for a healthy expression of emotion. Likewise, our obsession with competition and excellence often result in parents giving their child unrealistic praise ("You're the best on your team!"), leading a child to fear rejection if they do not live up to that reality. A fear of failure can prompt parents to protect their child at all times, thus not giving their child the opportunity to learn from mistakes, manage disappointment, or develop appropriate coping skills. While challenging, parents can help their child navigate the world by encouraging him/her to take positive risks; offer support and encouragement; provide a space for your child to talk about their fears or concerns; and allow for mistakes and the opportunity to learn and grow from them.

TERMINOLOGY

Stress *is a normal brain chemistry reaction* to a challenging situation and can make us feel nervous or frustrated. Stress can have a positive effect by motivating us to work hard at something, but if stress becomes overwhelming, it can have negative physical and emotional effects. Stress …

- can makes us feel nervous, frustrated, angry
- can be motivating to help us prepare for a challenge
- can be overwhelming and over the long-term affect our health

Anxiety *is a normal reaction to stress.* The body's automatic fight-or-flight response is activated when we feel pressure, danger, or risk. Anxiety is expressed emotionally and physically and is not uncommon among children and adolescents. If anxiety becomes a persistent, excessive fear or worry about situations that are not threatening, it can interfere with daily activities and relationships. Anxiety …

- is often out of proportion to the real or imagined "threat"
- can make children feel that something bad will happen to them and they will not be able to handle it
- can be about something specific or a general sense of uneasiness

How to Recognize Anxiety & When to Seek Support

In moderation, anxiety is not inevitably a bad thing - it protects and prepares children. However, developmentally appropriate worry or fears can become problematic if they inhibit a child's day-to-day functioning or do not diminish over time. Parents can watch for these common physical, emotional, and behavioral signs of anxiety. Many signs of anxiety are common among children of all ages, however there are age-specific signs of anxiety that parents can watch for.

Signs of Anxiety in Young Children

Physical Signs of Anxiety

- Frequent complaints of headaches/stomachaches, with no medical cause
- Won't use restrooms, except at home
- Has trouble falling or staying asleep
- Refuses to eat snacks or lunch at school
- Can become restless, fidgety, hyperactive or distracted

Emotional Signs of Anxiety

- Cries often, acts extremely sensitive, has tantrums
- Afraid of making even minor mistakes, has extreme test anxiety
- Worries about things that are far in the future
- Has obsessive thoughts/compulsive behaviors (finger tapping, hand washing, etc.)
- Becomes grouchy or angry without any clear reason
- Has panic attacks (or is afraid to), phobias, or exaggerated fears
- Has obsessive thoughts about things that might cause harm

Behavioral Signs of Anxiety

- Asks "what if?" constantly. ("What if a tornado happened?")
- Becomes emotional or angry when separating from parents or loved ones
- Refuses to go to school/avoids participation in school discussions or activities
- Avoids social situations with peers outside of school
- Constantly seeks approval from parents, teachers, and friends
- Has compulsive behaviors (finger tapping, hand washing, etc.)

Additional Signs of Anxiety in Teens & Tweens

Physical Signs of Anxiety

- Refuses to eat in the cafeteria/public places, changes eating habits suddenly

Emotional Signs of Anxiety

- Cries often, becomes cranky or angry for no clear reason
- Cannot handle any criticism, no matter how constructive
- Doubts one's own skills and abilities, even when there's no reason to

Behavioral Signs of Anxiety

- Begins to have explosive outbursts
- Avoids participating in class activities, remains silent, or preoccupied when expected to work with others.
- Starts withdrawing from activities that were once loved

When to Seek Support

Many children will exhibit signs of anxiety occasionally, but if signs persist, become more intense, or are coupled with these risk factors, do not hesitate to reach out to your child's doctor.

~ When anxiety disrupts your child's daily functioning
~ If your child exhibits self-harm behaviors, such as cutting or talking about suicide
~ When anxiety does not dissipate over time
~ If there is a family history of mental health issues

RESOURCES

AETNA: Health Guide – Kids & Anxiety
https://www.aetna.com/health-guide/kids-anxiety-whats-normal-seek-help

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
https://www.aacap.org/aacap/families_and_youth/resource_centers/anxiety_disorder_resource_center/home.aspx

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
https://www.nami.org

Psychology Today: Reasons Teens Have so Much Anxiety Today
https://www.psychologytoday.com/10-reasons-teens-have-so-much-anxiety-today

Portions of this tip sheet were adapted from the listed resources

Parenting for Prevention is a Decisions at Every Turn Coalition educational series for parents and other caring adults to increase awareness and knowledge about important youth issues and to encourage dialogue about making healthy choices.
Please visit http://www.AshlandDecisions.org/parent-tip-sheets.html for our complete library of tip sheets.

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