

Childhood Anxiety

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure or heart rate. People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry.

- American Psychological Association

Threat Response System

- When we perceive a threat in our environment, our body prepares to respond to it.
- We have a biological predisposition to engage in either fight, flight, or freeze
- Fight: kicking, screaming, spitting, pushing, throwing things, glaring, clawing the air, gasping for breath, clenched fists
- Flight: darting eyes, restlessness, excessive fidgeting, doing anything to get away, running without concern for safety
- Freeze: holding breath, heart pounding or decreased breath, shutting down, feeling unable to move, escaping in to own mind, feeling numb, whining, daydreaming

Brain regions involved in anxiety:

Amygdala

- Oldest part of the brain
- Amplifies emotions
- Reacts quickly (fight, flight, freeze)
- Responds to novelty
- Engages attention

Prefrontal Cortex

- Last part of the brain to fully develop
- Executive functioning
 - o Planning, organizing, self-control, attention, task-initiation, etc.

Hippocampus

- Remembers details
- Stores memories

When does the capacity to worry develop?

- Anxiety and worry require a certain amount of cognitive development
- Newborns have some innate fear, but it takes time for the capacity of anxiety to develop
- Imagination is required

Typical Causes for anxiety based on age:

- 3-5 years: separation, water, strangers, loud noises, animals, darkness
- 6-7 years: loud/abrupt noises, supernatural (ghosts), being alone or lost, nighttime
- 7-8 years: the dark, real-life catastrophes, not being liked, feeling left out, feeling left out by family or rejection at school
- 8-9 years: humiliation/embarrassment, failure, victim of violence, parents not be together
- 9-11 years: failure, becoming sick, specific animals, heights, sinister people
- 11-13 years: failure, being “different” from peers, sex, life-threatening disease, being brainwashed or fooled, losing things or being robbed

How do adults contribute to childhood anxiety?

- Children feed off adult anxiety
- Talking about COVID in-front of children
- Watching the news when children are around
- Talking about “adult” topics with children present
 - Finances
 - Work
- Responding emotionally to children when they are experiencing anxiety
- Placing too high of expectations on children
- Not giving children the opportunity to play, explore, and have fun!

Left Brain vs. Right Brain

- Left: logical
- Right: emotional
- When children are anxious, they are needing connection to the emotional/empathic center of the brain (right hemisphere)
- “explaining” why their fears/worries are irrational is trying to connect with the left hemisphere or the logical side of the brain; therefore, you are missing the child’s emotional need

Name It to Tame It

In order to help a child that is feeling anxious you need to first acknowledge and validate their feeling (name it) before you can rationalize with them (tame it).

When a child is anxious, they are in their right brain (emotional). When they are acting from their emotional brain you need to connect with that side first. Once you have done this you can bring the child in to their left brain (logical brain) and talk through the feelings with them.

Example: “You are feeling very SAD right now because your block tower fell over”



Three step model to de-escalation

1. Validate the feeling/emotion by identifying it and naming it
2. Help the child identify why they are feeling it (do this at least three times)

Example: A child is feeling very upset because they can’t go play at a friend’s house due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Say: “You are feeling very angry right now”

Followed by: “because you can’t play with your friends right now, and because you don’t want to play at home by yourself, and because the COVID-19 restrictions are impacting your life”

sometimes you need to do this more than once

When to reach out for help:

- When the anxiety/worry is impeding their daily functioning and normal activities
 - Won’t go on playdates
 - Sports and extracurriculars are impacted
 - Won’t join clubs at school
- Fears and worries are out of the ordinary
- Extreme emotional outbursts
- Physical symptoms
 - Tummy aches
 - Head aches
 - Sleep problems

Strategies for adults, parents, and caregivers can use to help children and youth manage their anxieties.

- **Support them to accept uncertainty:** uncertainty and the unknown is something that people worry about a lot because of the potential for negative outcomes. It is impossible for an adult to eliminate uncertainty for a child, but you can help them to be more accepting of uncertainty and unknown situations.
- **Support them to challenge their underlying beliefs and thoughts:** negative and irrational beliefs such as, “if I don’t bring my friends at school gifts, they won’t like me,” or “if I fail my next test I won’t pass this grade level,” are significant factors in generating anxiety. As an adult, it is important to model and communicate effective ways to question and challenge anxiety provoking thoughts and beliefs.
- **Be patient:** sometimes the behaviours of anxious children and youth may seem unreasonable to other. It is important to remember that an anxious young person who cries or avoids situations is, in fact, responding instinctively to a perceived threat. Changing avoidant behaviours takes time and persistence.
- **Be a role model:** if you are able to manage your own anxieties, young people will see that it can be managed and will incorporate your strategies into their own behaviours. Adults learning how to manage their own anxiety has been shown to be helpful in reducing their children’s anxieties.
- **Balance reassurance with new idea:** when a child comes to you with something they are worried about, listen and understand what is happening. Explore with them what they can do to manage their fears.
- **Encourage plenty of physical exercise and appropriate sleep:** when a person is well-rested and relaxed, they will be in a better mental state to handle fears or worries.
- **Moderate the consumption of caffeine and high sugar products:** caffeine products, including energy drinks and cola’s, increase levels of anxiety as they cause energy levels to spike and then crash. This leaves a person feeling drained and less able to deal with negative thoughts.
- **Show children and young people some simple relaxation techniques:** deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and meditation can be helpful as a way of learning how to better manage physical anxiety symptoms. Generally, these techniques are only consistently if practiced consistently over several weeks. It is best to introduce these techniques when the child is calm, so they have already practiced it for when they become overwhelmed.
- **Make time for things that your child enjoys and finds relaxing:** these could be simple things like playing or listening to music, reading books, or going for walks.
- Help them face the things or situations they fear: learning to face their fears and reduce avoidance of feared objects and situations, is one of the most challenging parts of overcoming anxiety. Facing fears usually works best if it is done gradually, a step at a time.
- **Encourage help-seeking when needed:** make sure that children and young people know there are people who can help if they find they can’t handle a problem on their own. Knowing that they can call on other for support if needed will make them feel less anxious about what might happen in the future.