

Anxiety in Children and Adolescents

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal and natural human emotion. However, if it causes significant distress or interference in one's daily functioning, it may be an anxiety disorder.

- Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health problems of childhood and adolescence.
- Children and adolescents may experience it as worry, fear, nervousness, or panic.

What Causes Anxiety?

Some factors that have been found to cause anxiety in children and adolescents include:

- **Biological factors** (genetics, sensitivities to neurochemicals such as adrenaline)
- **Sensitive temperament** (heightened sensitivity to threatening or bad events or objects)
- **Psychological factors** (things you think and feel)
- **Social/Environmental stress** (school, friends, siblings, parents, media)

How to Deal with Anxiety in Children and Adolescents

Parents can have a big influence on their children. There are many ways you can help your child effectively manage his or her anxiety.

- Teach your child ways to calm down, such as deep breathing.
- Reward brave behavior.
- Ignore anxious behaviors such as whining, clinging, and throwing tantrums.
- Model brave, non-anxious behavior. If you are a worrier, try to limit how much you talk about your worries to your child.
- Help your child or adolescent practice mindfulness. Your child is less likely to worry about the past or the future if he or she is focused on the present.
- Refrain from excessively reassuring your child.
- Give your child or adolescent an appropriate level of autonomy.

When is Anxiety a Disorder?

All children and adolescents have fears and worries. Your child might have an anxiety disorder if the following characteristics are present:

- The worries or fears are **unrealistic**
- The anxiety is **out of proportion** to the situation
- Your child has a **hard time controlling** the anxiety
- The anxiety **doesn't go away** on its own
- Your child **avoids** things because of the anxiety
- Anxiety makes your child's life much **harder** than it needs to be

Types of Anxiety Disorders

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Specific Phobia
- Social Phobia (aka Social Anxiety Disorder)
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

How to Treat Anxiety Disorders

You may decide that your child could benefit from professional help to manage his or her anxiety.

These are evidence-based ways to treat anxiety:

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- CBT is based on the idea that thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are connected.
- Anxiety can be managed by correcting unrealistic, distorted thinking and changing behavior that makes the situation worse.
- The goal is to help your child learn to "talk back" to his or her anxious thoughts and to unlearn anxious behaviors.
- In CBT, a therapist conducts exposures, helping your child face the fear until the anxiety decreases.
- Exposures is a stepwise process – they start small and work up as he or she becomes less and less anxious.
- The child or adolescent learns that the thing he or she is afraid of is not dangerous.
- Children and adolescents also learn relaxation techniques to help them calm down when anxious.