

Youth Get Anxious Too: Know the Signs and How to Help

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Anxiety is a normal in child's life. Most of us experience it, as it is a typical reaction to tense, stressful situations. In moderation, it can boost our performance at school or at work. A slight rush of it can help a child focus more sharply on a spelling test or a big soccer game.

But, how can parents distinguish normal anxiety or persistent and serious worry? Studies have shown that 13 percent of children between the ages of 9 and 17 struggle with anxiety severe enough to cause considerable discomfort. Similarly, the National Institute of Mental Health has released a large, national survey reporting that about eight percent of teens ages 13 to 18 have an anxiety disorder, with symptoms commonly emerging around age six and often rarely identified. However, only 18 percent of these teens received mental



health care.

When anxiety becomes excessive and begins to interfere with aspects of a child's functioning, such as academic, social or family functioning, the symptoms may warrant evaluation and treatment. Often the anxiety can actually cause a child or teen to "avoid" experiences essential to their development. An evaluation can assess the frequency, in-

tensity and/or duration of the worry, and how much it is interfering with the child's usual functioning and activities.

Problem anxieties can persist for weeks or months at a time, manifesting physically through headaches, stomach aches, nausea or vomiting. Children may have difficulty sleeping, experience nightmares or have problems concentrating. Some chil-

dren will avoid anything that causes stress, refusing to go to school or engage in normal activities. Anticipatory anxiety – worrying days, weeks or even months ahead – also causes some children significant distress. Frequent irritability, hyperactivity especially in young children, and anger, particularly in adolescents, also may be indications that a child is becoming frustrated or overwhelmed by stress and worry. Constant worry and concerns about family members or "catastrophizing" about future events are red flags that a child's anxiety has become problematic.

Anxiety can range from a phobia or extreme fear about a specific object or situation to social anxiety or fears related to meeting or talking to people or avoiding certain situations to generalized anxiety disorder with worrying excessively about most everything, particularly about future events. These should not be discounted. Current research has shown that children who experience anxiety are more likely to struggle with depression as teens and adults.

The good news is that many emotional and behavioral disorders can be prevented or helped if identified early and treated in childhood and adolescence. Behavioral therapy can help to alleviate a child's fears, assist in managing anxiety, and consequently facilitate the child's return to healthy functioning in relatively short time.

Parents of a child with anxiety may often feel quite anxious themselves, as it is

difficult to see their child experiencing worry and distress. It is not uncommon to find that anxiety may run through certain families. Staying calm and reassuring when dealing with an anxious child, listening carefully and being patient are a great remedy.

Two helpful tips for parents:

- The goal is not to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it. The best way to help a child overcome anxiety is not to try to fix it or remove stressors that trigger it, but to help the child learn to tolerate and manage anxiety and function the best he/she can, which may be through professional consultation and treatment.

- Express positive and realistic expectations. A parent cannot promise a child that her fears are won't be realized—that she will not fail a quiz nor have fun on a play date. But a parent can express confidence that she is going to be okay, able to manage it and that, as she faces her fears, her anxiety level will decrease over time. Parents can give children the confidence that they will support them through the process of identifying and managing anxious feelings, in order for them to establish healthy relationships, succeed in school, work and play...and develop a healthy, positive sense of self.

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