

# Anxiety in children

FACTSHEET FOR TEACHERS



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# What is anxiety?

Just like adults, feeling worried or fearful from time to time is natural for children.

However, if these feelings start to affect their day-to-day activities such as school work, taking part in class, or playing with friends, this may be a sign that they are experiencing anxiety.

Anxiety can affect anyone, of any age, background, or social group.

## How common is it?

Anxiety disorders occur in around 2-5% of children aged 12 and under according to the NHS, with an estimated 5-19% of all adolescents affected.

Young Minds estimates that one in six will experience anxiety during their lives.

That means up to five people in your class may be living with anxiety of some kind.

## Types of anxiety

Common types of anxiety in children can include:

### School based anxiety

Children may become anxious about schoolwork, going to school, friends, or bullying, particularly when changing schools or moving classes.

Rather than sharing these worries with you, children may complain of feeling sick, tummy aches, or show signs of being tired in the morning.

### Separation anxiety

Common in young children, typically six months to three years old, separation anxiety is when a child worries about not being with their parent(s) or regular carer(s).

In older children, this can be a sign that they are feeling insecure about something such as a change at home.

## Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

One of the most common forms of anxiety, children with GAD may feel anxious about a wide range of things rather than a specific event.

They often feel anxious most days, and may struggle to remember the last time they felt relaxed.

## Social anxiety

A level of social shyness is normal for some children. When it starts to affect everyday activities like shopping, speaking on the phone, going to school, or seeing friends it could be a sign of social anxiety.

This tends to affect young people who have gone through puberty rather than younger children.

## Fears and phobias

Common childhood fears such as dogs, water, or the dark are a normal part of growing up.

If this fear becomes overwhelming and affects their day-to-day life, it could have the potential of becoming a phobia.

## Other anxiety disorders

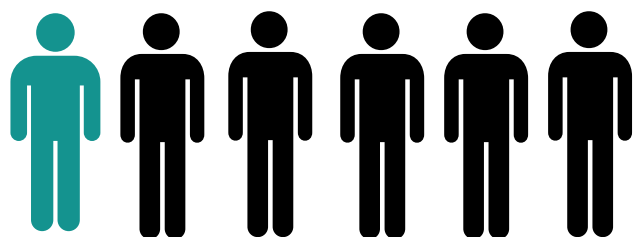
**Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** and **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** occasionally affect children but are more common in adults.

**Panic attacks** are rare for children.

1 in 6

Young people will experience anxiety

- Young Minds



# What causes anxiety?

We don't always know what causes anxiety.

Some things may contribute to children's anxiety, such as experiencing multiple stressful events one after the other, or they may pick up on anxious behaviours or tense situations around them.

It may not be a single event or thing causing their anxiety.

Anxiety UK describes anxiety as a bucket that we keep adding little stressors to.

Over time, it can fill up until one day it overflows. Anxiety that seems to come from nowhere could be built up out of lots of these little things.

## Spotting the signs

Anxiety can affect people in different ways.

Young children in particular may not understand or be able to express what they are feeling.

Children tend to feel anxious about different things at different ages. Many of these worries are a normal part of growing up.  
– NHS

Signs to look out for include:

### Young children

- Being tearful or irritable when other children are not
- Clingy when other children are not
- Consistently tired (from trouble sleeping, bed-wetting, or persistent nightmares)

### Older children

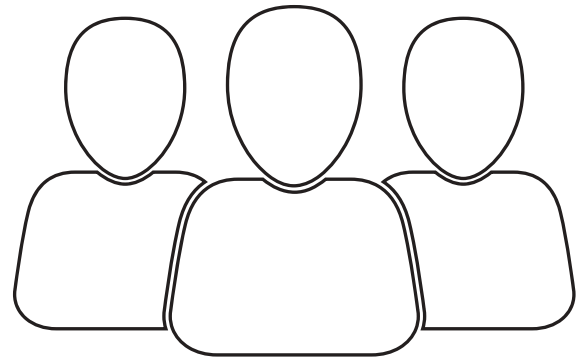
- Trouble concentrating
- Lack of confidence trying new things
- Angry outbursts
- Problems eating or sleeping
- Negative thoughts repeating or thinking bad things will happen
- Avoiding everyday activities
- Feeling tired, irritable, down or depressed

## Children of any age

Children may experience a mixture of physical and emotional symptoms at any age.

These can include:

- Feeling **fearful** or **panicky**
- Complaining of '**butterflies**', **tummy aches**, **chest pains** or **headaches**
- Feeling **tense** or **fidgety**
- Increased **need to go to the toilet**



300,000

Symptoms can come and go, so it can be beneficial to note down any symptoms you notice to see if they persist.

Seeing one or most of these symptoms doesn't necessarily mean your student has anxiety.

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling  
– NHS

Young people in Britain have an anxiety disorder



# Tips for helping anxious kids

There are plenty of ways you can help your children understand their feelings and tackle their anxiety.

## **Avoid removing stressors**

By removing stressors, children may get the idea that they can't do something, or that avoidance is the best course of action.

Instead, help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and keep going as well as they can, even when they are feeling anxious. Over time, their anxiety may decrease.

## **Set positive, realistic expectations**

You can't promise an anxious child that they won't fail a test, that someone won't laugh if they get an answer wrong in class, or that they will enjoy taking part in a class play or performance.

You can reassure them that things will be ok, and they will be able to manage no matter how things go.

This will also help build their confidence and should help their anxiety levels to drop over time.

## **Validate, don't empower their fears**

Respecting and acknowledging their fears doesn't have to mean you agree with or amplify them.

Listen and empathise to help them understand, recognise and face their worries.

## **Avoid leading questions**

Encourage children to talk about their feelings with open-ended questions. This will help avoid feeding into the cycle of anxiety.

For example, ask 'How are you feeling about the test?' rather than 'Are you anxious about the test?'

## **Think things through with them**

It may help to talk through what could happen if the thing that is worrying them did happen. If a child is anxious about a parent forgetting to pick them up, what could they do?

Then what? Then what? Talking through the different steps can help them figure out a rough plan for what they could do, which may help

reduce any stress or worries around that issue.

## Take a deep breath

Try practicing a few simple relaxation techniques with your class to help them calm down and focus when they start to feel the signs of anxiety taking hold.

Simple breathing exercises like taking a deep, slow breath in for a count of three, then out for a count of three can help them to calm down and break out of a negative thought cycle.

## What help is available?

Most children grow out of their anxieties, however some do not. If you're concerned that a child's worries have started to affect their day-to-day life, it may be worth talking to their parents, potentially raise the possibility of speaking to your school counsellor or their GP.

Depending on the cause of their anxiety, the child's GP may recommend counselling, referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), or medication.

Other complementary therapies may also have a positive impact.

Children's yoga classes, meditation, and mindful breathing exercises can positively impact them and help them to relax.

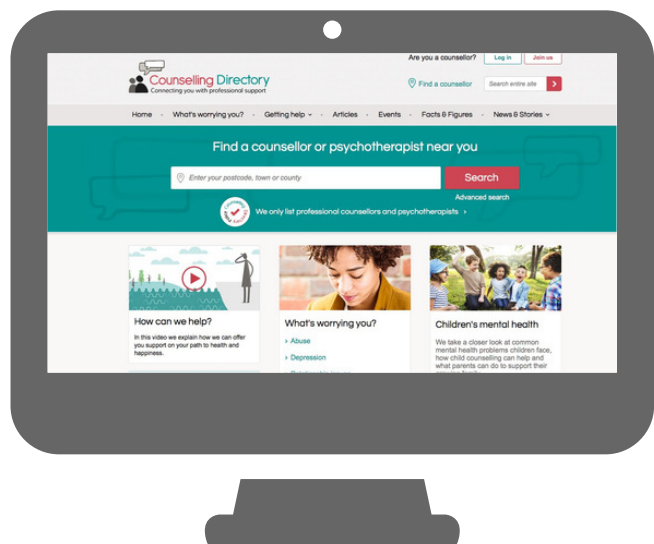
We have created anxiety factsheets for parents and children, specifically designed to provide them with information and tips in seeking help if they suspect their child may be experiencing anxiety. You can download and print these for free from the Counselling Directory.

Discover more at:

[www.happiful.com](http://www.happiful.com)

and

[www.counselling-directory.org.uk](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk)





## Self-care tips

Practising self-care can help your own mental and physical health and well-being during stressful times.

If you're worried someone's well-being, make sure you don't neglect yourself. Try to practise healthy self-care.

For more information and tips, visit Counselling Directory at:

[www.counselling-directory.org.uk/self-care.html](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/self-care.html)

## Further Information

**NHS** - national health service providing information, diagnosis, and treatment.

**Anxiety UK** - charity providing information and support for people with anxiety.

**Young Minds** - leading mental health charity for young people in the UK.

**Counselling Directory** - connecting you with professional counsellors and psychotherapists, providing articles written by experts and further information on anxiety.