

Anxiety in children

FACTSHEET FOR PARENTS



Contents

What is anxiety?	3
What causes anxiety?	5
Tips for helping anxious kids	7
When and where to seek help	9
Further information	11

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, playing with friends, taking part in after school activities, or persist over long periods of time, this may be a sign that they are experiencing anxiety and may need help to overcome it.

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 child's class may be living with anxiety of some kind.

Types of anxiety

Common types of anxiety in children can include:

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 may feel anxious about a wide range of things rather than a specific event.

They often feel anxious most days.

Specific fears or 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.

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.

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

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, they may complain of feeling sick, tummy aches, or show signs of being tired in the morning.

Other anxiety disorders

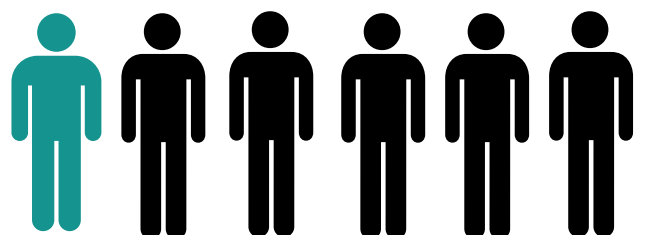
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** occasionally affect children but are more common in adults.

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 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

- Difficulty sleeping or waking in the night
- Bad dreams
- Bed wetting
- Being tearful or irritable
- Clingy when other children are not

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

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:

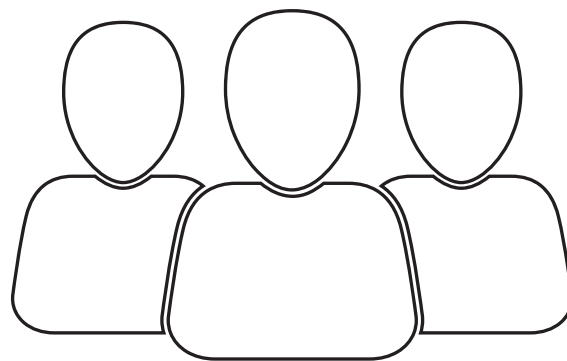
- Feeling **fearful** or **panicky**
- Complaining of '**butterflies**', **tummy aches**, **chest pains** or **headaches**
- Feeling **tense** or **fidgety**
- Increased **need to go to the toilet**

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 child has anxiety.

If you are concerned, it is important to talk to your GP for a diagnosis or referral.

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



300,000

Young
people in
Britain have
an anxiety
disorder



Tips for helping anxious kids

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

Talk to them

- Make sure they know it's ok to talk about what's worrying them. Let them know you understand how they feel, and you're here to listen.
- Reassure them that you love them, are proud of them, and you are here for them no matter what.

Explain anxiety

- If they're old enough to understand, try explaining what anxiety is and the physical effects it can have on our bodies.
- The NHS recommends describing anxiety as a big wave that builds up and then ebbs away again, while Anxiety UK describes it as a bucket that collects our worries and then overflows when things get to be too much.
- Find a simple way to explain it that works for you.

Empower them

- Help them to find their own solutions to their problems.
- Try asking them what they think may help, and encourage them to explore solutions themselves or with you, rather than focusing on what could go wrong.

Find an outlet that works for them

- If they are finding it tricky to talk about what's worrying them, ask your child to try drawing what they are feeling, or writing it down, then discuss what they are feeling together.
- Some children may find it easier to explain their worries this way.

Recognise the signs

- Teach your child to recognise the signs of anxiety in themselves.
- If they can spot and understand what they are feeling, they can ask for help.

Find relatable materials

- Whether your child is anxious about specific events or things in general, there are hundreds of books, cartoons, apps, and activity packs out there to help them - and you - understand what they are feeling, and tackle it in a healthy way.

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, they may complain of feeling sick, tummy aches, or show signs of being tired in the morning.

Take a deep breath

- Try practicing a few simple relaxation techniques with your child 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 for a count of three in, then out for a count of three can help them to calm down and break out of a negative thought cycle.

Keep a diary

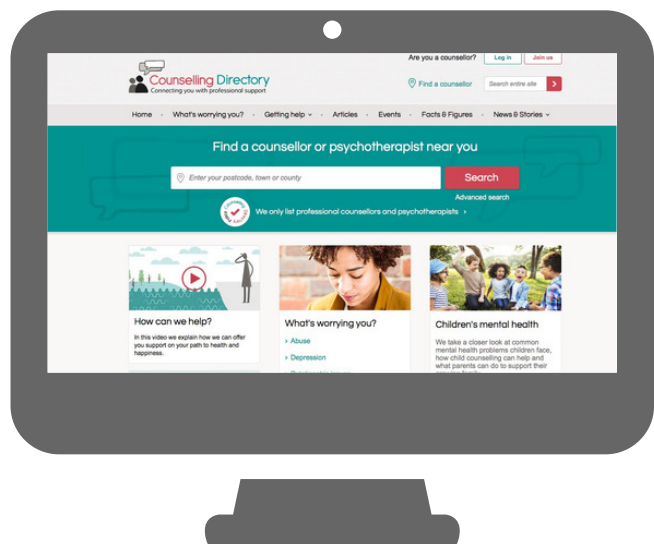
- Encourage them to write down their worries, how often they feel anxious, and other symptoms they may have.
- Recording what, when, and how their anxiety is triggered can help them to recognise and understand situations that they may not realise are making them anxious.

Discover more tips at:

www.happiful.com

and

www.counselling-directory.org.uk



When and where to seek help

Most children grow out of their anxieties, however some do not.

Anxiety can affect their long-term development (for example, missing school due to anxiety can negatively impact their education and opportunities to make friends).

If anxiety starts to affect their day-to-day life, it seems like their worries are not getting better, or things are getting worse, it may be worth seeking professional help from your GP.

Your doctor should listen to your concerns, and will offer advice on what they feel is the best course of action.

This may involve a referral to your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), where trained professionals including psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists offer help and support to both children and their parents.

Depending on the cause of your child's anxiety, different treatments may be offered.

These may include:

Counselling

- Counselling sessions aim to help children work through what is making them anxious and figure out how they can work through these situations.
- Talking in confidence about their worries with a trained person that they don't know can be helpful.
- If referred to CAMHS, counselling may take place with a child and adolescent psychotherapist or a clinical psychologist.
- If you chose to see a private counselling service, online resources like Counselling Directory can help you find local, qualified specialists in anxiety and children's mental health.



Cognitive behaviour therapy

- A type of talking therapy, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) can help children manage their problems by helping them to change the way they think and behave.
- Research has shown CBT can help children six and over deal with less severe anxiety. Commonly offered to young people, around 9-20 sessions are typical.
- During these, a therapist will work with your child to find ways to change the way they think and find ways to cope in situations that make them feel anxious.

Medication

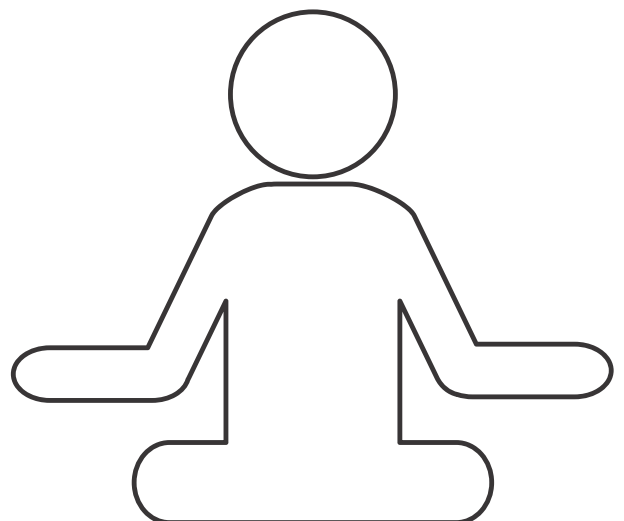
- If their anxiety hasn't started to improve, your doctor may suggest trying medication.
- Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor (SSRI) is a type of antidepressant that may be prescribed, as it can help people feel calmer and differently about things.
- Medication usually takes 2-4 weeks to start working, so an immediate difference may not be noticeable. If recommended, your GP will be able to talk through any possible side effects with you.

Clinical hypnotherapy

- Clinical hypnotherapy can be used to help make children feel relaxed and safe whilst practicing visualisation techniques that focus on them picturing events and places they feel safe, to help them improve their anxiety.

Other complementary therapies may also have a positive impact.

Consider enrolling your child in a children's **yoga** class, practising **meditation** together, or exploring **mindfulness** classes.



Self-care tips

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

If you're worried about your child's well-being, make sure you don't neglect yourself and try to practise healthy self-care.

For more information and tips, visit Counselling Directory at:

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.