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Childhood Anxiety

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? What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a type of stress that everyone experiences at some point. Simply put, it is a worry about what might happen in the future. In children, this worry can be triggered by a difficult or unfamiliar situation, such as a move to a new school, an upcoming math test, a disagreement with a friend, or loss of a loved one. Most children have fears of specific objects, such as spiders or roller coasters, but the feelings that accompany anxiety are not typically directed toward one thing and can leave them with a general feeling of nervousness. Anxiety can often be a good thing that can boost productivity and help a child do his or her best; however, when feelings of stress and worry interfere with everyday activities, this can be a concern. You might hear someone describe a child with anxiety by saying, "He worries too much about everything!"



? What causes childhood anxiety?

There is no definite cause of anxiety, but several factors may play a part such as genetics, learned behaviors, and stressful situations. We do know that childhood anxiety is not a sign of parenting.

? What are the warning signs for childhood anxiety?

The anxiety a child experiences can develop into an anxiety disorder that impacts performance in school and social interactions. The signs and symptoms that indicate an anxiety disorder include:



- Headaches



- Stomachaches



- Muscle tension



- Tiredness



- Social withdrawal



- Excessive worry, occurring more days than not for at least six months



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(cont.)



- Difficulty sleeping at night or extra tired during the day



- Difficulty concentrating



- Irritability



- Restlessness or feeling on edge



- Seeking comfort in order to calm fears (i.e., "Will we get there on time? What if I can't fall asleep the night before the test?")



What can I do to help reduce my child's anxiety?

A mental health professional can diagnose and prescribe a plan to treat an anxiety disorder. They may use techniques such as role-playing, relaxation exercises, positive "self-talk," and/or breathing exercises. Whether or not a child has a diagnosed anxiety disorder, the best thing a parent or teacher can do is be compassionate, nonjudgmental, patient, and positive. When adults share personal experiences of anxiety and stress, they can help children feel like they are not alone in having such feelings. Parents can help younger children learn strategies to cope with anxiety through unstructured play by providing toys and/or games that direct and encourage social interaction, boost creativity and confidence, and teach children to think and plan ahead.

Resources:

"Anxiety Disorders," KidsHealth, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/anxiety-disorders.html#>

"The Child Anxiety Network," last modified January 31, 2016, <http://www.childanxiety.net/>.

"Generalized Anxiety Disorder," Child Mind Institute, accessed August 9, 2016, www.childmind.org/guide/guide-to-generalized-anxiety-disorder.

"Tips for Parents and Caregivers," Anxiety and Depression Association of America, accessed August 9, 2016, <https://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/tips-parents-and-caregivers>.

"How to Help Children under 10 Cope with Anxiety," Mommy Edition, accessed August 9, 2016, <http://www.mommyedition.com/how-to-help-children-under-10-cope-with-anxiety>.

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