

# Counseling by the Shore, LLC

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## “ANXIETY AND YOUR CHILD”



We all love our children so much and when we see them anxious *we worry*. Anxiety disorders are fairly common during childhood, affecting approximately 1 out of every 8 children. But in addition to abnormal anxiety (in which fears are irrational and magnified), some types of anxiety are developmentally appropriate (such as separation anxiety in a 1-yr-old child). Even so, any kind of anxiety can be upsetting for you and your child. A relatively low level of anxiety usually has little or no effect on your child's ability to function in daily life, but higher levels may cause difficulty with school, friends, and family.

### What is anxiety?

To understand anxiety, let's look at fear first. Fear is a protective mechanism and part of normal development, it's an appropriate reaction to a *real* danger. Anxiety is a reaction to a *perceived* danger or threat and becomes a problem when magnified to the extreme. Some of the symptoms that are experienced with excessive anxiety are:

- feelings of panic, fear, and uneasiness
- uncontrollable, obsessive thoughts
- compulsive behavior
- sleep problems
- cold or sweaty hands or feet
- racing heart

### Developmentally Appropriate Anxiety

Developmentally appropriate anxiety includes any anxiety that relates to a fear common to developing children of the same age.

- *Infants and toddlers*: fears such as separating from the parent, fear of strangers, being in the dark and hearing loud noises
- *Preschoolers*: fears of imaginary entities such as ghosts and monsters, sleeping alone, and weather events such as thunder and lightning
- *Elementary school-aged children*: realistic fears about natural disasters, animals,

- burglars, physical injury, and worries about academic performance
- *Middle school-aged children*: concerns about social comparison and acceptance by their peers, and concerns about academic and athletic performance
- *High school teenagers*: continued concerns about social acceptance, academic and athletic performance, and worries about larger world issues and the future

Developmentally appropriate anxiety usually does not require intervention by a doctor or counselor, unless it becomes severe enough that it interferes with your child's functioning.

### **Abnormal Anxiety**

Abnormal anxiety results from irrational fears or rational fears that have been magnified to appear much more dangerous than they really are. Some examples are:

- excessive concern about germs
- severe test anxiety resulting in physical symptoms
- fear of monsters
- fear of flying insects
- school phobia
- fear of and avoidance of social interactions

Children have both a lack of experience in life and an incomplete ability to reason logically. Therefore, they are often unable to accurately assess the likelihood of a frightening event.

### **Different Forms that Anxiety Can Take**

- *Generalized Anxiety*- excessive uncontrollable worry in most areas of life
- *Separation Anxiety*- worry about separating from parent, fearful something will happen
- *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*- unwanted thoughts or impulses, repetitive behavior
- *Phobias*- anxiety about specific object or event
- *Panic Attacks*- sudden surges of severe anxiety symptoms, fear of fainting, having a heart attack, dying, losing control, going crazy
- *Social Anxiety*- consistent fear of social situations or of performance
- *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*- exposure to a traumatic event, resulting in intrusive thoughts about event, flashbacks, nightmares

### **How Anxiety is Manifested in Adults and Children**

Adults have greater insight into themselves, so are more likely to be able to name their feelings and discuss them. Symptoms often seen in adults include:

- obsessions and compulsions
- restlessness and sleep disturbances (insomnia, difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep)
- physical symptoms (headache, stomachache, nausea, vomiting, rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, a "choking" feeling, difficulty breathing)

Children are more limited in their ability to cope verbally and may experience:

- irritability, anger and tantrums
- frequent crying
- many physical problems also
- sleep disturbances such as nightmares and night terrors.

### **Causes**

- anxiety in caretakers
- inability to express feelings even while sensing caretaker's emotional upset
- repeated exposure to high levels of stress
- traumatic events such as tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, and house fires
- other kinds of trauma such as abuse or neglect causing hyper-vigilance
- repetitive thoughts about traumatic events leading to chronic anxiety or compulsions
- family history of anxiety
- allergies or food intolerances
- no apparent cause

### **Treatments**

Treatment for most anxiety disorders generally involves one or more types of therapy.

- *Meridian Tapping Technique (MTT)*- tapping on acupuncture points (meridians) while focusing on the disturbing emotion or thoughts which releases blocked energy and decreases feelings of anxiety in just a short period of time (works very well with children)
- *Relaxation Techniques*- slow deep breathing, visualization, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness meditation, yoga, Qi Gong, Tai Chi, massage therapy
- *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)*- identifying self-defeating thoughts and learning to replace negative self-talk with positive self-talk
- *Percussive Suggestion Technique (PSTEC)*- audio therapy that includes tapping sequences, with a rapid desensitization to the feared events or objects; can significantly reduce anxiety
- *Exposure Therapy*- gradual exposure to uncomfortable situation or objects
- *Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)*- helping child to take responsibility for their own feelings
- *Adaptive Coping Techniques*- helps child gain confidence that he can handle a new situation
- *Accepting and Commitment Therapy*- teaches child to live in the present and to accept thoughts and feelings with mindfulness instead of judgement
- *Physical exercise*- boosts mood, stimulates anti-anxiety effects by decreasing adrenaline ("fight or flight" chemicals) and increasing endorphins ("feel good" chemicals)
- *Nutritional supplementation/herbal and homeopathic remedies*- can often decrease anxiety and improve mood
- *Allergy testing and treatment*- ruling out, and if needed, removing aggravating factors
- *Anti-anxiety medication*- may be beneficial when used short-term with other

therapies

### **Helping Your Anxious Child**

As a parent, you want to do everything you can to help your child recover from his or her anxiety. You may feel your own anxiety about the situation, even if you were not anxious before. ***The first best action you can take to help your child is to deal with your own anxiety.*** As indicated earlier, children can “pick up” anxious feelings from parents and other caregivers. If you learn more and better ways to cope with your own anxiety, then you can set an example by using coping techniques and you will also keep from transmitting your own negative feelings to your child. ***Getting help for your anxiety first will make it much more likely that your child's level of anxiety will decrease.***

### **Other Ways You Can Help**

- Validate your child's feelings– “It's okay to feel bad sometimes.”
- Refrain from saying things such as “Don't be scared” which do not acknowledge your child's feelings.
- Don't over-schedule your child.
- Limit the number of activities and make sure your child has some free time, in addition to a good night's sleep.
- Give your child a little extra comfort.
- Routines will help your child to know what to expect; a chaotic home is stressful to you and your child.
- Listen if your child wants to talk, but don't pressure.
- Reassure your child that you are there whenever he or she needs you.
- Let your child know that you have confidence in them.
- Physical health is important. This can be achieved by plenty of sleep, healthy eating, and exercise to distract and lift your child's spirits.

By obtaining therapy for yourself, then following the tips above, you will help yourself and your child to experience less stress and anxiety. This will result in a healthier mind and body and a happier life for both you and your child!

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*I specialize in working with children and parents experiencing anxiety. My goal is to help you to decrease your anxiety and that of your child. I use innovative and creative therapies that will help to resolve distressing feelings either of you are experiencing. If you have any questions about this article or would like to discuss any concerns that you have, please feel free to contact me at the phone number or email address below.*

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