

Tip Sheet

Managing Anxiety in Children

What is anxiety?

In everyday language the term "anxiety" refers to a vague unpleasant emotional state with qualities of apprehension, dread, distress and uneasiness. All children experience fears and anxiety as they grow and develop. These might be about specific places, things, or events, or the anxiety may be quite general in nature. Sometimes however the fears and anxieties experienced by children can be overwhelming and debilitating. When this happens it is likely that the child is experiencing clinically significant anxiety and an anxiety disorder may be present.

What are some of the symptoms and signs of anxiety in children?

The symptoms of anxiety are similar for both adult and children and fall in several discrete categories. The *physical* symptoms of anxiety are caused by the brain sending messages to parts of the body to prepare for the "fight, freeze, or flight" response. Accordingly the heart, lungs and other parts of the body work faster. The brain also releases stress hormones, including adrenaline. The following symptoms can occur as a result:-

- abdominal discomfort
- diarrhoea
- dry mouth
- rapid heartbeat or palpitations
- tightness or pain in chest
- shortness of breath
- dizziness
- frequent urination
- sweating
- feelings of choking
- chills/hot flushes

Psychological symptoms of anxiety can include:-

- insomnia
- irritability or anger
- inability to concentrate
- fear of madness
- feeling unreal and not in control of your actions
- fear of dying

In children anxiety may also be expressed through crying, tantrums, freezing, clinging or shrinking from social situations with unfamiliar people.

Tips for Managing Anxiety in Children

1. Provide a safe, secure, familiar, consistent, and dependable home.
2. Spend calm, relaxed time with your child. For example read with them, have a picnic somewhere quiet.
3. If appropriate, encourage your child to express their concerns, worries, or fears.
4. Listen to your child without being critical or dismissive.
5. Build your child's feelings of self-worth. Use encouragement and affection. Try to involve your child in situations where he or she can succeed.
6. Try to use positive encouragement and rewards instead of punishment.
7. Allow your child opportunities to make choices and have some control in his/her life.
8. Develop awareness of situations and events that are stressful for your child. These include new experiences, fear of unpredictable outcomes, unpleasant sensations, unmet needs or desires, and loss.
9. Be selective in the television programs that young children watch (including news broadcasts). These can produce fears and anxiety.
10. Recognize the signs of anxiety in your child. Ask yourself, "How do I know my child is anxious?" If appropriate, point these signs out to your child.
11. Discourage avoidance of things that are anxiety provoking and reward your child when he/she tries to do things that make him/her anxious.
12. Ask yourself, "Does my child seek reassurance a lot?" If you think so then limit the amount of reassurance you give. Instead of saying "You'll be okay" ask what he/she is anxious about and problem solve.
13. Keep your child informed of necessary and anticipated changes such as changes in routine, jobs or moving.
14. Encourage physical activity to help your child relax.
15. Ask yourself "What soothes my child?" and then encourage your child to do that. For example he/she might like listening to calming music or taking a warm bath.
16. Teach your child to breathe deeply. As he/she exhales have him/her say "Calm".
17. Sometimes teaching a child problem solving skills can be helpful. These skills can be effectively modeled. For example whilst reading a book together or watching a television program you could ask a series of questions such as:-
"What is the problem here?" or "What do you think is going on?"
"What do you think that person could do about that?"
"What else might they be able to do?"
"What do you think would happen if they did that?"
"What would you do?"
18. If possible help your child become aware of the links between feelings and behaviours, and thoughts, feelings and behaviours.