



ONTARIO ASSOCIATION FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY

(A Division of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy)

"Helping with life's most precious relationships"

Helping Kids Cope with Anxiety By Anita Pal, M.Sc., RMFT

As a parent, it can be hard to watch your young child express their anxiety about leaving your side to go to kindergarten or nursery school. Later on we might experience the frustration of watching our older child or teenager try and avoid school or an activity, citing a stomach ache or headache. Contrary to what some might think, children experience anxiety on a daily (sometimes may seem like an hourly) basis! Anxiety is a normal reaction to change or in anticipation of change. In fact, human beings rely on anxiety as a signal that something needs to change or be attended to.

Anxiety, however, can prove unhelpful if it becomes paired with feelings of helplessness. This combination can become a barrier to your child accomplishing the developmental tasks they need to. Examples of "unhelpful" forms of anxiety include anxiety that leads to school avoidance behaviours or somatic complaints such as frequent stomach aches or headaches. Anxiety is also unhelpful if it is interfering with your child getting to sleep or staying asleep. Long term feelings of high anxiety and helplessness can also contribute to development of adult anxiety disorders and eating disorders.

Anxiety in children is heightened by family disruptions such as changes in schools, moving households, divorce, or death of a loved one. Other contributing situations can include performance based expectations connected to competitive sports or activities, or in relation to school based expectations.

What ever the cause of the anxiety, there are a number of constructive things that a parent can do to assist their child.

- 1) Let your child know that anxiety is normal and everyone gets anxious. Explain that it is the body's way of checking out what is going on around you. Anxiety is only a state. Even if you do nothing, it will pass. Rather than try and fight the anxiety, teach your child to explore anxiety as simply another feeling or sensation with curiosity rather than fear. Encourage your child to try new things and take risks.
- 2) Teach your child how to self calm by making sure they are breathing. The most typical physiological response for an adult or a child when experiencing anxiety is to hold their breath. Holding your breath sends a signal to the brain to increase adrenalin, which in turn increases the sensation of anxiety. By breathing slow deep breathes this calms the nervous system and signals to the brain that all is well. A good trick for young children is to have them learn to blow bubbles or blow on a pinwheel as this teaches the same motions as deep breathing (works for grown ups too!)

- 3) Try and sort out the root cause of the anxiety if it appears to be a recurring issue (for example, the anxiety might be highest before some type of regular “transition” time such as bed time, or the night before a child is scheduled to alternate between two parents in a divorced family). Once you have identified the transition that appears to trigger the anxiety, do a little research to see if there is some way to make the transition easier for the child.
- 4) Help your child develop daily routines. For example, everyone needs healthy sleep routines (including teens and adults). These routines should include a period of preparing the body for sleep such as having a bath, snack, and some kind of wind down activity for 15 to 20 minutes before lights out (note watching TV before bed is not recommended for children as research shows that it tends to over stimulate certain areas of the brain in young children).
- 5) Examine the boundaries that exist for your child. Is your child exposed to situations where they are getting “adult” information that they can do nothing with? For example, a ten year old hearing three or four news reports a day on TV or the radio citing wars, assault, deaths, and dire financial predictions can do nothing with the information except ruminate. Try and protect your child from exposure to broad media messages and talk with your child about the fact that news that you hear via TV, radio, or internet is unbalanced (good news does not sell as well as bad news).
- 6) Recognize if anxiety is becoming problematic and seek professional help sooner rather than later. Untreated sleep issues or school avoidance problems only grow over time and are harder to treat if they have become entrenched patterns of behaviour over years rather than months.

Books for Parents:

Helping Your Socially Vulnerable Child: What to Do When Your Child Is Shy, Socially Anxious, Withdrawn or Bullied. Andrew Eisen & Linda Engler

Helping Your Child Overcome Separation Anxiety or School Refusal. Andrew Eisen, Linda Engler, & Joshua Sparrow

Coping with an Anxious or Depressed Child. Samantha Cartwright-Hatton

Books for Children and Teens:

Fighting Invisible Tigers: Stress Management for Teens, 3rd Edition. Earl Hipp,

The Anxiety Workbook for Teens. Lisa Schab

Is a Worry Worrying You? Ferida Wolff & Harriet May Savitz, illustrated by Marie Le Tourneau (story book for younger children)

What to Do When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough: the Real Deal on Perfectionism. Thomas S. Greenspon (for ages 9 – 13)