Child Anxiety: What Can Parents Do?

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Childhood Anxiety Disorders

Among the most common type of psychopathology (Affrunti & Ginsburg, 2012)

Prevalence rate of about 5% (Muris, et al, 2010)

25.1% of 13-18 year olds suffer from an anxiety disorder (Weersing VR et al., 2017)

Doesn’t necessarily remain stable over time (Laurin, Joussemet, Tremblay & Boivin, 2015)
### Be Aware of the Age of Onset...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disorder</th>
<th>Specific Phobias</th>
<th>Obsessive Compulsive Disorder</th>
<th>Generalized Anxiety Disorder</th>
<th>Panic Disorder</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Anxiety Disorder</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Greatest risk between childhood and middle age</td>
<td>Not as common in children; typical onset in adulthood (20 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Specific Phobias</td>
<td>7 years</td>
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Parents: How do you think your children feel when they are experiencing anxiety?
Physical Symptoms

“Fight-fright-freeze”

Older children (around 13) are more likely to associate sweating, feeling warm and an unpleasant feeling in the head as related to anxiety (notice-less severe feelings in general).

Children as young as 7 can reliably understand their physical symptoms and link them to their anxiety; some as young as 4.

(Huberty, 2010)

(Muris, Mayer, Freher, Duncan & van den Hout, 2010).

Physical
- Stomach discomfort
- Warm/hot feeling
- Dizziness
- Rapid heart rate
  - “Strange feeling in chest”
- Flushing of the skin
- Perspiration
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Sleeping problems
- Nausea
- Shortness of breath
- Trembling
These physical symptoms can then be interpreted as a “catastrophic” physical occurrence, making the child’s anxiety intensify.

“Feeling nauseous” can range from non-anxiety producing “prefer to stay home”, to the belief there is an external threat such as, “eaten something wrong” to an internal threat such as, “going to throw up”.

Dizziness -> Too many spins? Fell down? Afraid of fainting?

Unpleasant feeling in the head -> Too many choices? Afraid someone is going to laugh at me? Something is very wrong inside my head?

(Muris, Mayer, Freher, Duncan & van den Hout, 2010).
Behavioral Symptoms

- Restlessness
- Fidgeting
- Task avoidance
- Rapid speech
- Irritability
- Withdrawal
- Perfectionism
- Lack of participation
- Failing to complete tasks
- Seeking easy tasks

(Muris, Mayer, Freher, Duncan & van den Hout, 2010).

Thinking/Learning Symptoms

- Concentration problems
- Memory problems
- Attention Problems
- Problem-solving difficulties
- Worry

(Muris, Mayer, Freher, Duncan & van den Hout, 2010).


Younger children (under 7) are less likely to interpret anxiety as stemming from an internal factor (Muris, et al, 2010).

External signals have been found to cause anxiety more often in younger children (Affrunti & Ginsburg, 2012).
Risk factors for developing anxiety as a child include:

- Child’s sex (girls are at a higher risk)
- Child’s early aversion to new experiences
- Family environment (low family support, inter-parental conflict especially before the age of 5, poverty, maternal depression)
- Children of parents with anxiety
- Child-rearing practices, particularly controlling practices, are the most impactful
- “...controlling parenting are the strongest and most consistent...predictors of childhood anxiety” (p. 3280)
Controlling parenting

- Over-control (excessive parental regulation of activities and routines)
- Over-involvement (interference with autonomy; boundary problems)
- Autonomy thwarting (parent deters child’s opinions, choices, or input)

(Laurin, Joussemet, Tremblay & Boivin, 2015)
“It is important to differentiate controlling parenting from structure.”  
(Laurin, Joussemet, Tremblay & Boivin, 2015)

**Controlling parenting**

Defined as: practices that put pressure, are intrusive or are domineering on children.

- Power assertion
- Intrusion
- Internal control: guilt, shame, overprotection, appeals to the feelings of anxiety
- External control: threats of punishment, coercive practices, invokes feelings of anxiety

**Structure**

- Emphasizes outcomes due to actions
- Clear and consistent guidelines
- Predictable consequences
- Clear feedback
What does it look like? Examples:

**Coercion:**
- Telling your child they are bad/not good
- Punishment depends on parent mood
- Corporal punishment

**Over-protection:**
- Assuring the child remains near the parent
- Not letting others watch the child

**Over-permissive:**
- Letting the child pass on something that the parent should have punished them for
- Not firmly implementing the punishment

**Structure:**
- Discussing problems calmly with child
- Removing privileges for a continued behavior
- Discussing alternate ways of behaving
- Ensuring a child executes a desired behavior

(Laurin, Joussemet, Tremblay & Boivin, 2015)
How to help your child

- Be consistent in how you handle problems and administer discipline.
- Be patient and be prepared to listen.
- Avoid being overly critical, disparaging, impatient, or cynical.
- Maintain realistic, attainable goals and expectations for your child.
- Do not communicate that perfection is expected or acceptable.
- Accept that mistakes are a normal part of growing up and that no one is expected to do everything equally well.

- Teach your child simple strategies to help with anxiety, such as organizing materials and time, developing small scripts of what to do and say to himself or herself when anxiety increases, and learning how to relax under stressful conditions.
- Do not treat feelings, questions, and statements about feeling anxious as silly or unimportant.
- Often, reasoning is not effective in reducing anxiety. Do not criticize your child for not being able to respond to rational approaches.
- Seek outside help if the problem persists and continues to interfere with daily activities.
- Praise and reinforce effort, even if success is less than expected. Practice and rehearse upcoming events, such as giving a speech or other performance.

Coping skills are *not* innate; they are taught.

...they must be practiced
Simple Coping Skills for Preschool Age

- Blowing bubbles, breathing activity
- Provide a safe place for breaks
- Read books about feelings and how to deal with them
- Validate their feelings
- Counting breaths
  - Count each breath, up to 10, or their ability
  - Will automatically slow their breathing

https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/mindfulness-for-children-kids-activities/#tips-teaching-mindfulness
Simple Coping Skills for Elementary Age

- Deep Breathing
- Books about feelings
- Grounding
  - 5 things you can see
  - 4 things you can touch
  - 3 things you can hear
  - 2 things you can smell
  - 1 thing you can taste
- Visualization
  - Imagine a happy place
- Distraction
  - Read a book
  - Take a walk
  - Draw a picture
    - Mandalas
- Fidget/calming tool
  - Squishy ball
  - Sand (kinetic sand)
  - Stress ball
- Practice mindfulness

https://copingskillforkids.com/blog/using-shapes-to-teach-deep-breathing
Coping Skills for Teenagers

- Deep breathing
- Visualization
- Grounding (see previous slide)
- Yoga/Meditation
- Practice Mindfulness
- Practice positive self-talk
  - “I can do this”
- Distraction
- Exercise
- Support Groups
- Get enough sleep
  - 8-10 hours (National Sleep Foundation, 2018)
- Challenge negative thoughts
- Stop! Break the thought cycle
- Adult coloring books (Mandalas)
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
  - Tense each part of your body, starting from your toes, and release one at a time, continue throughout body
Mindfulness

“A mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique”

http://www.dictionary.com/browse/mindfulness?s=t

“If you want to conquer the anxiety of life, live in the moment, live in the breath.”

Amit Ray

https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/mindfulness-quotes/
Resources/Additional Recommendations

- National Association of School Psychologists
- GoNoodle.com
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America:
  - [https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety](https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety)
- 37 Techniques to Calm and Anxious Child:
Thank You

“Be where you are, otherwise you will miss your life.”

Buddha


