

Anxiety - Understanding and Supporting your Child.

Learn the best ways to help your child with anxiety.

It is believed that nearly 1 in 3 of teens have an anxiety disorder. If untreated, anxiety disorders can lead to doing poorly in school, difficulty making friends and sleeping or drug abuse.

"Anxiety is excessive, unmanageable worry that makes it difficult to concentrate on necessary tasks or fun activities," explains Roshini Kumar, LPC, clinical therapist at Children's HealthSM. "Anxiety can affect both our brains and our bodies and make us feel helpless and sad if not corrected."

Types of anxiety disorders

Some anxiety is a normal response to stress. But anxiety disorders are mental disorders when a person worries or has too much fear for a long period of time.

Types of anxiety disorders include:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder** – This is worrying too much and not being able to control it. It can cause problems focusing, sleep, muscle tension, lack of energy, anger or irritability and being restless.
- **Specific phobia** – This is an extreme fear of a specific event or object. Often, this causes the person to stay away from even important events.
- **Social anxiety disorder** – This is an extreme fear of being judged or rejected in social situations. Children can show this fear by crying, having tantrums, or refusing to speak, among other things.
- **Separation anxiety disorder** – This is seen when children have a lot of anxiety when separating from loved ones. It often includes refusing to leave home, nightmares and worry about harm to a loved one they can't control.
- **Panic disorder** – In this disorder, feelings of intense fear happen suddenly and regularly, without warning. Symptoms can include fast heartbeats, muscle tightness, shortness of breath and sweating, among other symptoms.
- **Selective mutism** – This is when a child will not speak in settings where they need to – such as school. It can affect their ability to do well in school and other social settings.

Best ways to help your child with anxiety

To help your child with anxiety, it's important to know the symptoms of anxiety. To support your child:

- Choose a time of day to check in about mood. This can be around the breakfast or dinner table, or on the way home from school. A routine check in will give your child time to prepare and a place to share their feelings.
- Notice changes that could be a sign of anxiety. For example, if grades start slipping, your child could have difficulty concentrating.

- Model healthy behavior by practicing coping skills with your child. Take deep breaths together, take a long walk, color or paint while listening to relaxing music.
- Practice positive thinking. Try changing a negative thought to a thought that is both truthful and helpful.
- Notice when your child is doing well and give them specific feedback on what they did well. Create a list of behaviors, skills, and activities they did well. Put this on the fridge or other common area and add to this list often.
- Notice when they are having more trouble than normal with their symptoms. Talk with their doctor about any new concerns you have.

Therapy for kids with anxiety

One type of therapy is a form of talk therapy called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). This is used to help your child learn ways to think and act in situations that normally cause anxiety. This therapist helps your child identify thoughts and ways of thinking that make them feel anxious and teaches them how to change these to helpful thoughts.

Your child's doctor may also recommend other types of therapy. This might be just for them, group therapy with other children, counseling for you to teach you how to help your child, or therapy that take place at their school.

Activities for children with anxiety

Their doctor or therapist may suggest physical and mental activities to ease anxiety. Physical activities that can help calm anxiety in children include:

- Taking deep breaths
- Using grounding techniques - like noticing something you can see, hear, smell, touch and taste
- Going to a safe space in your home to do a relaxing activity, like reading or drawing
- Doing something to distract them, like "I Spy" or a board game
- Mental activities to help children with anxiety include:
- Spotting early warning signs of anxiety, like muscle tension or restlessness
- Naming the thought that pops up when physical warning signs occur. Many times, this thought starts with 'what-if', and focuses on the worst thing outcome could happen
- Help your child change the thought to state both truth and helpful thoughts
- Practice ways to catch unhelpful thoughts and change them throughout the day

Medicines for anxiety in children

If your child's anxiety is severe and does not get better with therapy, their doctor may recommend medicine to help them.

Learn more about treating anxiety in children

Children's Health can help children and teens manage anxiety. Learn more about programs we offer to support mental, emotional, and behavioral health. You can also get emotional care and support from the comfort of your home with Virtual Visit Behavioral Health. With a behavioral health care appointment, you can speak to a psychiatrist or licensed therapist using video technology. Learn more about Virtual Visit Behavioral Health.