



TIP SHEET



Understanding Childhood Anxiety

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

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Anxiety is a normal and common emotion that everyone experiences when faced with difficult, new, or challenging situations. Shaking, sweating, increased heart rate, butterflies in the stomach (sometimes even nausea), and a dry mouth are typical symptoms of anxiety.

All children experience anxiety as part of their normal development. However, what may be considered an appropriate fear at an early stage of development, for instance a fear of the dark at age three, or a fear of going to school in grade one, may be considered less appropriate when a child reaches middle childhood or adolescence. In other words, an individual's age must be taken into account when thinking about anxiety responses.

Children and youth experience different levels of anxiety and cope with anxiety in more, or less, effective ways. *Anxiety becomes a problem when it prevents individuals from enjoying normal life experiences for a long period of time (e.g. schooling, friendships, and family life).*

▼ How Common are Anxiety Disorders in Children?

About 1 in 6 children will suffer from anxiety severe enough to interfere with their daily life.

▼ What are the Causes of Anxiety Disorders?

Genetics: Children with anxiety disorders often have relatives who are shy or have anxiety difficulties

Learning: Children often develop fears in response to a negative experience with the feared object or situation (e.g. perhaps they were bitten by a dog) or observing someone who is afraid and learning from their fear (e.g. perhaps other family

members had a fear of social situations and they learned from them).

Accidental Rewards: Often children are accidentally rewarded by parents and others for being anxious. That is, they often get more attention and affection when they are scared than when they are acting bravely and independently.

Thinking Errors: Children who experience anxiety tend to exhibit different beliefs and thinking styles to those children who do not experience anxiety. For example, predicting the worst outcome and worrying "what if...", or underestimating their ability to cope (e.g. "I can't"). Some children may also show deficits in *coping or problem solving skills*.

▼ Different Types of Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety difficulties may present in different forms. The most common anxiety disorders are:

- **Generalised Anxiety Disorder:** This is characterised by excessive worry and fear about future or past events. This disorder is usually accompanied by somatic symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, vomiting and sleeping problems.

- **Separation Anxiety Disorder:** This is the fear of separating from primary caregivers, home or other familiar surroundings. The separation anxious child may engage in crying and pleading with parents not to leave and may display naughty behaviours and/or somatic complaints (i.e. stomach aches, headaches) during separation.

- **Specific Phobia:** This is a fear associated with a specific object or situation. Most common in children is fears of animals or insects, the dark, heights, thunderstorms, needles and other medical and dental procedures.

- **Social Phobia:** This is the marked and persistent fear of social and performance situations where the child is exposed to possible scrutiny or negative evaluation by others. Typically, the child fears that



they will act in a way that will be humiliating or embarrassing during social interactions, such as talking in front of a group of people, being the centre of attention, participating in sporting events or meeting new people.

- *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*: This is characterised by the presence of severe anxiety reactions or feelings following a traumatic event, such as witnessing a death, being involved in a near death experience or sexual abuse.

- *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*: This is characterised by intrusive, obsessive thoughts which are usually alleviated by compulsive actions (e.g. washing hands 60 times a day), and checking behaviours (e.g. checking bag 20 times before going to school in case they have forgotten something). This disorder is extremely rare in children.

- *Panic Attack*: This is a discrete period in which there is a sudden onset of intense fearfulness or terror, often associated with feelings of impending doom. These feelings are accompanied by physical symptoms such as palpitations, chest pain or discomfort, difficulty breathing and choking sensations. Evidence suggests this is very rare in children, increasing in prevalence during adolescence and adulthood.



What Can be Done About it?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy helps children to change the thoughts that cause the fears and builds up their coping and problem solving skills. A therapist would teach your child how to recognise negative thoughts and to think more positively. These strategies are useful not only for anxiety difficulties but are fundamental skills in building emotional resilience and coping in children. The therapist would also help your child to gradually face the situations/events they have been afraid of in the past. This allows your child to discover that their fears usually do not come true, and that they can become less fearful of these situations as a result of facing them. In addition the therapist can teach your child how to relax and manage anxious feelings as well as build social skills that can help your child to feel more confident.

A number of studies have shown that most children who receive cognitive behavioural therapy for anxiety disorders feel less anxious.

Children usually continue to feel better even after therapy has stopped.



What Are Some Strategies that Can Help My Child Now?

- ✓ Praise and give attention to your child at times when they are acting brave and independent.
- ✓ Encourage your child to face their fears in small *achievable* steps. For example if your child is afraid of the water, get them to sit on the grass near the pool. When they feel calm and confident with this step, encourage them to sit on the side of the pool. The next step would then be putting their feet into the pool. When they can achieve this without distress, encourage them to stand in the shallow end with floaties (this may need to be done a number of times over a few weeks). When they are confident with this, progress to slightly more challenging steps. Be sure to reward your child with praise, attention and quality time, *each* time they achieve these steps!
- ✓ Negotiate appropriate rewards with your children for desirable behaviour
- ✓ Gently challenge your child's thinking by asking questions about the things they are afraid of (e.g. Are you sure this is really going to happen? What's the worst that could happen? Are you exaggerating? Is this way of thinking helpful? Is there another way of thinking?)
- ✓ Set a good example for your child about how you deal with your own fears and anxieties.
- ✓ Watch out for avoidance behaviour. This is what maintains or continues anxious feelings!

FOR FURTHER HELP: If you have any questions or need further help contact the number detailed below. Psychologists employed by Queensland Psychology Centre have at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide a professional and timely service to you in the area of childhood anxiety disorders