

## Anxiety in Children: How Parents Can Help

### What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal emotional state that we all experience at various times in our lives. It is closely related to fear, which is another normal and necessary emotion that everyone experiences. We need to be fearful of certain situations in order to protect ourselves from danger. Some words used to describe different states of fear include frightened, scared, afraid, panicky, and terrified. It is normal and beneficial for a person to experience fear when faced with real and immediate danger, for example when being chased by a dangerous animal. Anxiety is usually associated with anticipated fear of something happening in the future. Some words used to describe different states of anxiety include worried, concerned, anxious, nervous, tense, shy, and cautious. Anxiety is normal and beneficial when we are faced with a difficult situation. For example, it is normal for us to feel anxious before a test or speaking in front of a group of people, and our anxiety helps us to prepare for the difficult task.

### Sources of Anxiety in Childhood

Some children are born with an anxious temperament and seem to be anxious of many situations right from the start. It is believed that up to fifteen percent of infants are born with a more anxious temperament. There are developmental sources of anxiety throughout childhood as well and all children experience fears and worries as part of their normal development. Most young children experience fears of the dark, monsters, separation from parents, animals, and strangers. As children grow, these fears gradually change to fears about social acceptance, academic and sports achievements, health, mortality and family. Other sources of anxiety for children arise from normal life and family transitions. Children go through many changes and transitions as they and their families grow and mature. For example the birth of a sibling, starting school, moving to a new home, death of an elderly grandparent, becoming accepted by a peer group, and mastering tasks in and out of school can all be stressful and anxiety-provoking for children.

In addition, difficult or even traumatic events that are out of the ordinary can happen to a child with the likelihood that anxiety will increase for that child. For example, parental conflict and separation, illness or injury of the child or the child's family members, the unexpected death of a close family member, extended separations from parents, family or community violence, and natural disasters are all difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences for children to go through.

### How to Identify Children Who May Be Struggling With Anxiety

Children struggling with excessive anxiety may show the following:

- Pessimism and negative thinking patterns such as imagining the worst, over-exaggerating the negatives, rigidity and inflexibility, self-criticism, guilty thoughts, etc.
- Anger, aggression, restlessness, irritability, tantrums, opposition and defiance
- Constant worry about things that might happen or have happened
- Crying
- Physical complaints such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Avoidance behaviors, such as avoiding things or places or refusing to do things or go places

- Sleeping difficulties, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep, nightmares, or night terror
- Perfectionism
- Excessive clinginess and separation anxiety
- Procrastination
- Poor memory and concentration
- Withdrawal from activities and family interactions
- Eating disturbances

### **When Does Anxiety Become a Problem for Children?**

When a child is very young, normal fears can be accepted. However, as a child grows, fears and anxieties that were considered normal at a younger stage of development may be less appropriate. Anxiety becomes a problem when it prevents children from enjoying normal life experiences. For example, when anxiety begins to have an impact on school, friendships, or family, then parents or other adults may need to step in to help the child.

### **How You Can Help Your Anxious Child**

#### **Routines and Structure**

Establish consistent daily routines and structure. Routines reduce anxiety and regular daily patterns emphasize predictability. A regular routine will give a sense of control to both parent and child. Anxious children do not cope well with a disorganized, spontaneous family life style. Provide opportunities for exercise. Exercise is helpful in relieving stress and helping your child's body to relax. It is important for children to have limits set and consequences for breaking the limits. Children feel secure when there are limits setting restrictions on inappropriate behaviors.

#### **Help Children Identify Feelings**

Help your child notice different feelings by naming various feelings she or others may experience. Explain how people show their feelings (through faces, bodies, words) and that showing your feelings is an important way for others to understand how you are feeling. Help your child notice how different feelings "feel" in his own body, for example tight hands, butterflies in stomach, etc. It also helpful for children to talk about their feelings, however talking about feelings is not easy for children, especially when they are asked directly. It is important for parents to watch and listen carefully for the times when a child does express feelings, either directly through words or indirectly through behaviors. At these times, you can help your child by acknowledging and accepting her feelings through simply reflecting them back to her and refraining from providing advice or asking questions. When a child's feelings are criticized, disapproved of, or not accepted by a parent, his internal sense of self is weakened.

**If you have any further questions please contact your Family School Liaison Counsellor, Kelly Schmalz 403-771-4350.**