

## Childhood Anxiety

Everyone, from the youngest child to the oldest adult, experiences some fears at one time or another. Experiencing and dealing with fears and anxiety prepare young people to better cope with unsettling experiences and challenging life situations.

Anxiety usually occurs when there is no direct threat to a person's safety or well being, but the threat feels real. Anxiety makes a person want to escape the situation. The heart beats quickly; they might begin to perspire, accompanied by "butterflies" in the stomach. However, a little bit of anxiety can actually help people stay alert and focused.



The nature of anxieties and fears change as children grow and develop:

- Babies experience stranger anxiety, clinging to parents when confronted by people they don't recognize.
- Toddlers around 10 to 18 months experience separation anxiety, becoming emotionally distressed when one or both parents leave.
- Children ages 4 through 6 have anxiety about things that aren't based in reality such as fears of monsters and ghosts.
- Kids ages 7 through 12 often have fears that reflect real circumstances that may happen to them, such as bodily injury and natural disaster.
- Teens age 13-17 may experience anxiety related to social acceptance and academic achievement.

### **Anxiety can cause long term effects.**

If anxious feelings persist, they can take a toll on the child's sense of well being. Many adults are tormented by fears that stem from childhood experiences such as the fear of public speaking. This fear be the result of embarrassment in front of peers many years before. Another example is an adult who avoids social events. He/she may have had the fear of social rejection and did not learn important social skills as a child.

Long term anxiety or fear that's extreme can create a phobia. A phobia can be very difficult to tolerate, both for kids and those around them, especially if the anxiety is something hard to avoid such as thunderstorms.

## **Signs of Anxiety**

Children's anxieties need to be recognized and identified so that the fears don't become excessive.

Some signs that a child may be anxious about something may include:

- clingy, impulsive, or distracted behavior
- nervous movements: twitching, twisting hair, biting lip, shuffling feet or fidgeting
- Nightmares, problems getting to sleep or staying asleep.
- sweaty hands
- accelerated heart rate and breathing
- Physical illness such as: nausea, headaches and stomachaches.

There are ways to help children develop the skills and confidence to triumph over fears.

## **Steps to Help Overcome Fears and Anxiety**

- Recognize that the fear is real. Being able to talk about the fear helps take the power out of the negative feeling and helps the child to overcome it.
- Never make fun of or belittle the fear as a way of forcing the child to face it.
- Don't cater to fears or try to deliberately avoid the fear.
- Teach the child how to rate fear. If the child can visualize the intensity of the fear on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the strongest, he or she may be able to "see" the fear as less intense than first imagined.
- Teach coping strategies. Using you as "home base," the child can venture out toward the feared object and then return to you for safety before venturing out again.
- Teach positive self-statements, such as "I can do this" and "I will be OK".
- Relaxation techniques are helpful, including visualization of something comforting along with deep breathing exercises.

The key to resolving fears and anxieties is to overcome them.