

## Tip Sheets

### Anxiety in Children

Anxiousness is characterized at times by physical feelings of increased heart rate or palpitations, stomach pain, shortness of breath, headache and/or nausea. Emotionally, anxiety may cause people to feel insecure, fearful, worried, a sense of dread and/or may trigger a desire to escape from the situation.



Anxiousness and anxiety are common emotions that everyone feels at one time or another. All children feel anxious sometimes, and there

are developmental stages in early childhood in which children may experience anxiety when separated from their primary caregivers. This is developmentally appropriate. It is also normal for teens and preteens to experience social anxiety and anxiousness. These feelings of anxiousness typically are short-lived and infrequent.

#### Common Triggers of Normal Anxiety

- 7 to 12 months: Unfamiliar objects, people, etc.
- 1 to 5 years: Strangers, storms, animals/insects, dark, loud noises, monsters and bodily injury.
- 6 to 12 years: Bodily injury, disease, ghosts, staying alone, criticism, punishment and failure.
- 12 to 18 years: Tests/examinations, school performance, appearance, peer scrutiny and rejection and social embarrassment.

#### When to be Concerned

Anxiousness may indicate the presence of an anxiety disorder. Normal anxiousness becomes concerning when:

- It interferes with social relationships.
- It affects school work or willingness to attend school and other out-of-home activities.
- It affects physical health such as in frequent complaints of stomachaches, headaches, etc.
- Phobias interfere with how a child functions.
- A child is unable to regulate constant worries about what might happen or upcoming events.
- A child has panic attacks.

A child with anxiousness may also become withdrawn and quiet, making anxiety more difficult to recognize.

#### Other Red Flags

- Constant fears about safety of self/others
- Sleeplessness, nightmares, night terrors
- Extreme distress at certain triggers such as dogs, storms, the dark, etc.
- Difficulty meeting new people, making friends or not having any friends
- Need for constant reassurance
- Obsessive behaviors or depression
- Rapid heartbeat and sweating
- Overly eager to please others

#### Some Causes of Anxiousness

- Overly anxious and overprotective parents
- Parents with depression or anxiety disorder

- Parenting styles, such as harsh discipline or family dysfunction
- Stressful life circumstances/events such as poverty, divorce, homelessness, etc.
- Trauma such as abuse, witnessing violence, etc.
- World events such as a war, school shootings, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.
- Family death (a child may worry about others' deaths also)
- Overconsumption of caffeine
- Chemical imbalances in the brain (neurotransmitters such as norepinephrine and serotonin)

### Strategies to Help Alleviate Anxiousness

- Acknowledge a child's fears and talk about them. Let children know they are not alone as they work on overcoming their fears.
- Help children learn to change their thoughts from extreme- to less severe. Explore the reality of the fear so they can get a true picture of what might realistically happen.
- Teach children relaxation techniques to self-regulate and calm themselves such as deep breathing, imagining peaceful scenes and listening to calming music.
- Help children take small steps to overcome a fear, such as approaching a dog slowly until they pet the dog. Never force this on a child.
- Give positive reinforcement when a child overcomes a fear.



### When to Seek Help

If you have tried several strategies and still find that the child's anxiousness interferes with his/her daily living activities, such as going to school or child care, making and keeping friends, engaging in social activities or personal interests and hobbies, you may decide it is time to consult a professional.

Without intervention, children may experience difficulties maintaining friendships, academic failure, a lack of self-confidence and depression. Children may even develop anxiety disorders leading to school dropout and substance use/abuse.

For more information on anxiety, visit [www.inclusivechildcare.org](http://www.inclusivechildcare.org).

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