



Anxiety

Anxiety is extremely common among the pediatric population. Anxiety Disorders are the most common group of psychiatric illnesses in children and adolescents.

Anxiety and the associated disorders run in families, therefore one can say there is a genetic component to them. Like all psychiatric symptoms, the experiences the child has will play a role in the development of anxiety. The environment the child is raised in will also have some role in the development of anxiety.

So what is anxiety? Anxiety is worry and fear that something bad might happen. It can occur in preschoolers when they are afraid to watch mommy leave the day care or when they are afraid of monsters in the dark. It can occur in children when they are afraid to go to school. It can occur in adolescents when they fear rejection from peers. Most children and adolescents master their fears and anxiety.

Dealing with Anxiety at Home

When dealing with an anxious child, I find that often what seems the right way to handle the situation often makes the situation worse. I will explain. You cannot take your child's anxiety away. It is theirs, not yours. You can reassure, you can discuss, but you cannot take it away. The harder you try, more likely the worse the anxiety will get. For most parents, if your child is anxious, we will ask questions like "what do think will happen?" or "what is the worst thing that could happen?" or "why do you worry?" In reality the more questions we ask, the worse the anxiety will get. All of our questions stimulate the anxiety and in the child's mind they think, look how bad this is, see what mom and dad are doing to try to make it better. This makes the anxious child feel worse. Instead I suggest a simple three step approach:

- 1. Acknowledge the anxiety:**
"I am sorry you feel the need to worry about that."
- 2. Reassure them that it is not so bad:**
"I do not think you need to worry about that."
- 3. Dismiss the anxiety:**
"Everything will be fine."

Now here's the tough part. You must say no more. No questions, no more comments, nothing else should pass through your lips. Zip it! This is not a parent's nature. If you can do this, most children will



see you dismiss it and will be more capable of dismissing it as well. Give them time, do not pressure them, just step back, and give them space. Let it sink into their mind what you have said. It will help!

Anxiety or Anxiety Disorders

The difference between anxiety and the anxiety disorders is that everyone has some anxiety, not everyone let their anxiety rule their life. It is only a disorder when it impairs your ability to function. If I worry about something but I can perform and it does not interfere with other aspects of my life, it is only anxiety and not a disorder. If I cannot function because of my anxiety, then I have crossed the line to disorder.

What are the Types of Anxiety Disorders?

- **Separation Anxiety Disorder:** Children with Separation Anxiety Disorder have unrealistic persistent fears of separation from their parents. They are inappropriate, excessive and impaired in their ability to function in life.
- **Panic Disorder:** Panic Disorders occur when children or adolescents have a feeling of impending doom, when there is no reason to have such a feeling. They usually cannot say what they are afraid of, the feeling just comes on. They have many physiological symptoms like shaking, sweating, pounding heart, chest pain, shortness of breath, feeling of choking, nausea and often dizzy. Many children report that they feel like they might die. These attacks are extremely impairing.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder:** People with Social anxiety Disorder are very fearful about social situations. They will avoid contact with others. Children often experience panic attacks to avoid school
- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder:** This would represent the child or adolescent who worries about everything. Worry dominates their life. They make their decisions based upon how much worry they have about a given situation and not based on what they might want from life.

Treatment for Anxiety Disorders

The First-line approach to anxiety disorders is having your child see a therapist. Anxiety responds very well to therapy, particularly manualized cognitive behavioral therapy.

Medications can help these disorders. They should be used only in severe situations. Short acting medicines that can be used as needed exist and may help, however, ask your doctor about the addicting nature of these drugs. Some have addictive potential, like benzodiazepines; SSRI's, like Paxil, Prozac, Zoloft and others can be used in conjunction with therapy if the symptoms are so severe that you need an aggressive approach.



Long Term Prognosis

Most children will learn tools and strategies so that they can be in control of the anxiety instead of the anxiety controlling them. Because the genetic influence is quite real, many times children live with anxiety throughout their life. This is the best reason to see a therapist, to develop strategies to handle anxiety for a life time.

Resources

- Anxiety - Free Kids by Bonnie Zucker, Psy. D. (2009)
- Helping Students overcome Depression & Anxiety, 2nd ed. Kenneth W. Merrell, PhD (2008)
- Metacognitive therapy for Anxiety and Depression Adrian Wells, PhD (2008)

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