

Childhood Anxiety

Anxiety Basics:

- All anxiety is based on fear.
- The anxiety formula:
 - Overestimation of Threat + Underestimation of Ability to Cope = Anxiety
- Anxiety is more than just an anxious feeling. There are also cognitive, physical, and behavioral changes with anxiety.
- AVOIDANCE worsens anxiety. EXPOSURE lessens/alleviates it.
- When our children are anxious or worried about a particular experience or situation, it means they need
- MORE practice with that experience, not less!
- Most anxious adults report onset during childhood or adolescence - so this may not be just a phase," and should be evaluated by a professional if it impacts your child's functioning.

Red Flags in Anxious Children/Youth:

- Often seems worried or nervous
- Shows perfectionism
- Exhibits extreme shyness
- Cannot speak (or avoids speaking, only whispers, etc.) in certain situations
- Experiences social difficulties
- Has fears that are not age appropriate
- Has fears that impact school performance
- Avoids certain places, people, or activities due to fear
- Has crying spells or cries often when worried/nervous
- Refuses to come to school or separate from parents in the morning
- Constantly "checks in" with parent/teacher or doesn't want to be apart from the adult
- Exhibits problems sleeping or frequent nightmares
- Refuses to or is unable to sleep independently, once school aged
- Regression to earlier behaviors
- Along with OCD, hair pulling, skin picking, and hoarding are frequently seen together in students who have anxiety problems. These are VERY treatable - get a professional involved.

What causes anxiety?

- Anxiety tends to run in families, and research shows a genetic component.
- Research shows that, the more we are online, the more that we are exposed to social media, the higher our anxiety becomes. (This is true for children, adolescents, and adults!)
- Over-protecting our children can heighten their anxiety levels. It is particularly important for parents of anxious children to evaluate their parenting style and make sure they are not helicopter parenting!

Childhood Anxiety

Helpful Suggestions for Parents and Schools:

1. School Anxiety: Make a quick "getaway" each day, avoiding long goodbyes. Never "sneak out." Be very firm about daily school attendance. Consider having a different adult do the drop off. Use a morning routine. Use evening consequences for morning misbehavior/dawdling/refusing.
2. Generalized Anxiety: Consult a therapist. You can teach your child to use a relaxation method regularly and to use positive self-talk. Be careful not to rescue, micro-manage, or be overly protective with your child, as these will worsen his/her anxiety. Use 5-4-3-2-1, CALM app.
3. Social Anxiety: Extreme shyness often runs in families. The great distress and hardship it causes is unnecessary - extreme shyness is very treatable through a knowledgeable counselor. Encourage your child to make small steps toward socialization and participation in activities. Don't over-protect.
4. Test/Academic anxiety: Don't over-perform for your child's homework - let the responsibility really be theirs. Encourage practice tests in test-like environments; never present a test as "make or break," no matter how important the test is; teach and use a relaxation technique before tests or during homework. No social media (at all) during homework time.
5. General Recommendations for All Parents:
 - a. Encourage physical activity and exercise
 - b. Encourage independent sleep and homework completion
 - c. Do not over-protect, hover, over-supervise, or over-advocate
 - d. Be supportive and work toward gradual progress with fears and worries
 - e. Seek help sooner rather than later. Start with an experienced, licensed therapist who regularly treats youth your child's age.

Recommended Books:

- Freeing Your Child from Anxiety, by Tamar Chansky
- Getting Your Child to Say Yes to School, by Christopher A Kearney
- How to Raise an Adult, by Julie Lythcott-Haims
- The Anxious Generation, by Jonathan Haidt

Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW received her Master of Social Work degree from Washington University and is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in both Missouri and Illinois. She specializes in services to schools and enjoys providing presentations and seminars to groups of all sizes. Along with two colleagues, she is co-author of The Care Team Approach, a book for school professionals. In office, Amy provides psychological testing to evaluate students for ADHD, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns