

# Anxiety in Children and Teens



## What is Anxiety Disorder?

While anxiety is a normal part of childhood, if a child has extreme fear, nervousness or shyness and they begin to avoid places and activities, an anxiety disorder may be present. Left untreated, children with anxiety disorders have an increased risk of poor school performance, missing out on social experiences and engaging in substance abuse. Anxiety disorders can range from general anxiety to specific phobias. Anxiety disorders include obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder and post-traumatic stress syndrome.

## The Facts

- Anxiety disorders affect one in eight children.
- According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 25 percent of 13 to 18-year-olds will experience an anxiety disorder.
- Girls are 10 percent more likely to be affected by anxiety disorders than boys.
- Anxiety disorders in children are often accompanied by other disorders such as depression, eating disorders or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

## Signs of anxiety disorder:

Anxiety symptoms in children often display as medical symptoms and include:

- Stomach problems such as diarrhea or nausea
- Muscle tension, insomnia, headache or dizziness
- Crying or Tantrums
- Avoidance
- Clinginess
- Restlessness
- Trouble sleeping difficulty
- Difficulty concentrating
- Muscle aches
- Irritability

## Treatment Options

Most children find that they can manage and overcome anxiety disorders with professional help. However, no one treatment method works for every child. Anxiety can be treated in a number of ways, including medication and

cognitive-behavioral therapy, a type of talk therapy that is typically effective in treating anxiety disorders. Therapy can teach children skills to reduce anxiety. It can also help to change the thinking behind anxiety, as well as to change the reactions to anxiety-producing situations.

Medication is often included in the treatment of anxiety, and can be a short-term or long-term option, depending on the severity of the disorder and response times to treatment. The most commonly prescribed medication for the treatment of anxiety disorders in children is selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. SSRIs block the uptake of the neurotransmitter serotonin in the brain. Changing the balance of serotonin helps brain cells send and receive chemical messages, which is known to boost mood. It is important to discuss all possible side effects with the child's physician before starting a new medication.

If a child is diagnosed with co-occurring conditions, such as depression, ADHD or an eating disorder, further treatment options may be recommended.

## Tips for Managing Anxiety in Children

A child's diagnosis with an anxiety disorder is not a sign of poor parenting. Anxiety disorders are a medical condition that cannot be prevented.

Unlike adults who may realize their fears or anxiety about a situation are exaggerated, kids assume that their fears and worries make sense and are messages they should heed. Kids can learn that one important way of reducing anxiety is by changing the story their mind is telling them about the situation, and as adults we can help.

## Other tips for helping children manage anxiety disorders include:

- Pay attention to the child's feelings
- Stay calm when the child becomes anxious
- Praise small accomplishments
- Don't punish mistakes in dealing with anxiety
- Try to maintain a normal routine
- Modify expectations for the child during stressful periods – be prepared to handle anxiety during these times
- Plan in advance for transitions, such as the first day of school

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We're here to help. If you or someone you love is experiencing symptoms of depression, please contact Our Lady of Peace for an assessment and assistance with treatment options. Call (502) 451-3333 or 1-800-451-3637.

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