

Understanding Disabilities: Anxiety in Children and Youth

Lori Gallimore, EdD, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development
Kathryn Conrad, PhD, Extension Specialist, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

All children — at one time or another — experience some type of anxiety. Anxiety is a natural and expected part of life and very common part of the youth development process. Nervousness before a big test, for example, is typical, but situational — meaning that once the test is completed, the nervous feelings go away. General symptoms of anxiety include:

- Repetitive, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) or actions,
- Inability to control feelings of worry (termed “rumination”) – worry for self, others, or situations,
- Problems concentrating or mind going blank,
- Physical feelings, such as increased heart rate, flushed face, muscle tension or shakiness,
- Emotional feelings of irritability, restlessness or tension.

Stress versus Anxiety

While stress and anxiety are commonly thought of as the same thing, they are different. Stress is a temporary feeling of emotional or physical tension in response to a challenge. Everyone will experience stress from time to time. Stress can be positive, such as meeting new people, as it teaches us to solve problems and overcome new situations. Stress can also be negative or toxic, such as being bullied or rejected by peers, which if it lingers can poorly affect our mental health and well-being. Stress is often caused by an external trigger, such as school, work, relationships or other outside experiences that place pressure on the individual.

Anxiety involves more than just a temporary or situational worry or fear. Anxiety is a disorder internal to the individual that involves excessive fear and worry on an almost daily basis. Anxiety is diagnosed when an individual experiences several symptoms of anxiety, and the symptoms last for at least six months. An inability to recognize and seek treatment can lead to feelings of despair and depression.

Types and Symptoms of Childhood and Teen Anxieties

1. GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER (GAD)

Causes excessive worry due to a number of things. Children or youth with GAD have “catastrophic thinking” in anticipation of the worst-case scenario in a variety of situations, such as performing (public speaking, sports, etc.), health and safety of self or loved ones, storms, money, or transitions (first day of school, moving, etc.).

- Constant worry,
- Difficulty controlling worries,
- Irritability,
- Sleep disturbance,
- Inability to concentrate or remember things,
- Muscle tension.

2. SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER (SOCIAL PHOBIA)

Characterized by fear or anxiety toward social situations in which a child/teen must interact with or perform in front of others. Children and teens who suffer from this anxiety fear negative evaluation by others that results in feelings of shame or embarrassment. They will avoid social situations at all cost.

- Fear of meeting and talking with people.
- Avoidance of social situations.
- Few friends outside of the family.

3. SEPARATION ANXIETY

Diagnosed as intense fear regarding the safety of family member or other caregivers.

- Refusal to go to school.
- Frequent stomach aches or other physical ailments.
- Excessively clinging to a family member or caregiver.
- Panic or tantrums at times of separation.
- Difficulty sleeping and/or nightmares.

4. PANIC DISORDERS

Classified by intense panic that comes on quickly and reaches a climax within a few, short minutes. Most often, these attacks are caused by a trigger — a feared object or situation. People who suffer from panic attacks worry a lot about when the next attack will happen and will do anything and everything to avoid going places or doing things that might bring on an attack.

- Fast-paced or erratic heartbeat.
- Sweating and/or shaking.
- Difficulty with breathing.
- Feelings of choking or being smothered.
- Feelings of a loss of control of the situation.

5. PHOBIAS

Marked by an amplified feeling of fear that is out of proportion with the actual level of danger that could be caused by the situation or object.

- Extreme worry toward a specific thing or situation such as heights, flying, certain animals, blood or injections.
- Fears that cause disruption to daily routines and activities.

6. AGORAPHOBIA

Agoraphobia is an extreme type of anxiety. Agoraphobics have an intense fear of situations in which they feel that they might not be able to leave or overcome. The results are panic-like reaction. Agoraphobics have major anxiety to at least two of the following:

- Using public transportation.
- Being in open spaces.
- Being in enclosed spaces.
- Standing in crowds.
- Being outside of home alone.

7. SELECTIVE MUTISM

Another less-common type of anxiety, selective mutism occurs when people are unable to speak in specific social situations despite having normal language skills. This type of anxiety, although extremely rare, is most often diagnosed in conjunction with other anxiety disorders. It typically appears before the age of five and is associated with the following symptoms:

- Extreme shyness.
- Paralyzing fear of social embarrassment.

- Compulsive traits.
- Withdrawal — may stay in their room or another identified “safe spot.”
- Clinging behavior.
- Temper-tantrums.

Risk Factors for Anxiety Disorders

It is understood that anxiety is caused by a number of biological and environmental factors, including:

- Continued exposure to chronic stressful life or environmental events in early childhood, such as abuse, trauma or household dysfunction.
- History of anxiety disorders in biological relatives.
- Some physical health conditions, like thyroid issues or heart arrhythmias.
- Overuse of caffeine and other substances and medications.

Without Treatment

Treatment for anxiety, especially early in a child or youth’s development, is important. Treatment can be done through a variety of techniques, like using therapy, medical intervention or adopting healthy lifestyle changes. However, without treatment, children and youth are at risk for several challenges that can intensify the feelings of anxiety, including:

- Loss of friends.
- Inability to achieve academically.
- Failure to achieve economic and social potential, like graduating, getting and keeping a job and maintaining lasting relationships.
- Feelings of low self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Substance use or abuse.
- Increased risk for other mental health and physical health conditions, such as depression, stroke and heart disease, among others.

Tips for Managing Anxiety: Self

If you are experiencing anxiety, here are tips for managing symptoms:

- Accept that you cannot control everything.
- Do your best - but don't expect perfection.
- Learn what triggers your anxiety.
- Try to reframe the situation and think of it from a different perspective. Focus on what you can do and can control.
- Talk to friends and family.
- Limit caffeine - drink water.
- Eat well-balanced meals.
- Get enough sleep - 8 hours each night.
- Stay physically active.
- Use stress management techniques such as taking in several deep belly breaths or practicing mindfulness, which is a strategy that helps you focus on being in the moment.
- Take a break when feeling overwhelmed.
- Seek professional resources — a counselor, support groups, psychotherapy (cognitive behavioral therapy in particular is effective for anxiety), prescription medications (such as anti-anxiety meds, anti-depressants, beta blockers) or online teletherapy or text therapy.
- Understand that those around you may not identify with what you are going through, but that doesn't make your experience any less important.

Tips for Managing Anxiety: Caregivers

If you are caring for someone who is experiencing anxiety, here are tips for managing symptoms:

- Pay attention to your child's/teen's moods and behaviors as symptoms may come and go over time.
- Likewise, children and teens can hide their symptoms by saying or doing what is expected of them.
- Learn all that you can.
- Work in conjunction with your child's school to make them aware of your child's challenges and to ensure that your child is receiving appropriate care.
- Be respectful of your teen's feelings.
- Set a "new normal" in terms of your rules and expectations. These should be done out of consideration for your child's/teen's well-being and not out of anger.
- Take care of yourself.
- Continue to care for other members of your family.
- Involve other family members in caregiving and support.
- Remember, you are not alone. Do not be afraid to seek help — family therapy or individual counseling.

Where can I find more information?

If you are interested in learning more, find additional fact sheets as part of our **Understanding Disabilities** series.

[W 947-A Understanding Disabilities: An Introductory Guide](#)

[W 947-B Understanding Disabilities: Behavioral Health FAQ Sheet](#)

[W 947-C Understanding Disabilities: Intellectual and Learning Disabilities](#)

[W 947-D Understanding Disabilities: Screening for Disabilities in Children](#)

[W 947-E Understanding Disabilities: Respectful Etiquette and Language Guidelines](#)

[W 947-F Understanding Disabilities: Responsive Care](#)

[W 947-H Understanding Disabilities: Sensory Processing Disorder](#)

References

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (2017). Anxiety and Children. Retrieved from https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/The-Anxious-Child-047.aspx
- American Psychological Association (2019). What's the difference between stress and anxiety. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress-anxiety-difference>
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America (n.d.). Tips to manage anxiety and depression. Retrieved from <https://adaa.org/tips-manage-anxiety-and-stress>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (n.d.). Learning to help your child and your family. Retrieved from <https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Family-Members-and-Caregivers/Learning-to-Help-Your-Child-and-Your-Family>
- National Institutes of Mental Health (2018). Anxiety disorders. Retrieved from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>



UTIA.TENNESSEE.EDU

Real. Life. Solutions.™