

Health & Well-being Mental Health Campaign

Anxiety in Children



Just like adults, children and young people feel worried and anxious at times. But if a child's anxiety is starting to affect their wellbeing, they may need some help to overcome it.

Children tend to feel anxious about different things at different ages. Many of these worries are a normal part of growing up. From about eight months to three years, for example, it's very common for young children to have something called separation anxiety. They may become clingy and cry when separated from their parents or carers. This is a normal stage in children's development and tends to ease off at around age two to three.

It's also common for pre-school children to develop specific fears or phobias. Common fears in early childhood include animals, insects, storms, heights, water, blood, and the dark. These fears usually go away gradually on their own.

Throughout a child's life there will be other times when they feel anxiety. Lots of children feel anxious when going to a new school, for example, or before tests and exams. Some children feel shy in social situations and may need support with this.

When is anxiety a problem for children?

Anxiety becomes a problem for children when it starts to get in the way of their day-to-day life. Severe anxiety can harm children's mental and emotional wellbeing, affecting their self-esteem and confidence. They may become withdrawn and go to great lengths to avoid things or situations that make them feel anxious.

What are the signs of anxiety in children?

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. You may notice that they become irritable, tearful, clingy or have difficulty sleeping. They may wake in the night, start wetting the bed or have bad dreams. In older children you may notice that they:

- lack the confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems with sleeping or eating
- are prone to angry outbursts
- have negative thoughts going round and round their head, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public or attending school

Some children are more prone to worries and anxiety than others. Children often find change difficult and may become anxious following a house move or when starting a new school. Children who have had a distressing or traumatic experience, such as a car accident or house fire, may suffer with anxiety afterwards. Family arguments and conflict can also leave children feeling insecure and anxious.

Continued over the page.....