



Anxiety in Children

Feeling worried or nervous is a normal part of everyday life. Everyone is anxious at times. Mild to moderate anxiety can even be beneficial for children as it helps them to focus their attention, energy and motivation. However, children with heightened anxiety, or generalized anxiety disorder, have persistent worry that they are unable to control. They are preoccupied with or worried about their success in activities and their ability to gain others approval. Oftentimes they worry about being perfect.

If anxiety is severe, children may experience feelings of helplessness, confusion and extreme worry that are out of proportion with the actual seriousness or likelihood of the feared event. Overwhelming anxiety that interferes with daily life is not normal and may be a symptom of another problem. Anxiety disorders are a type of medical problem.

Anxiety disorders include:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder:** Feeling worried and stressed about everyday events and activities for several months and disrupts life on most days
- **Panic disorder:** Experiencing repeated panic attacks or sudden, intense fear which may include shortness of breath and an increased heart beat
- **Social anxiety disorder:** Feeling very anxious about what you will say or do in front of people to the point that it affects your daily life
- **Phobias:** Feeling very scared of a specific object, situation or activity, such as spiders, heights or small spaces

Below are some helpful tips parents can use if your child experiences heightened anxiety or generalized anxiety disorder:

- **Understand your child's illness.** Understanding the nature of your child's anxiety can help you to better sympathize with his/her struggles.
- **Listen to your child's feelings.** Listening empathically to your child can have a powerful and helpful effect.
- **Help your child keep calm when he/she becomes anxious about an event or matter.** If your child sees you respond calmly to a crisis he/she can learn to model your behavior over time.
- **Reassure your child.** Gently note that he/she survived prior situations that caused anxiety.
- **Teach your child relaxation techniques.** Teach him/her deep breathing, counting to 10, yoga and meditation. Teaching your child to relax can empower him/her to develop mastery over symptoms and improve a sense of control over his/her body.
- **Plan for transitions.** Getting to school in the morning or preparing for bed in the evening may be complicated by fears and anxieties. Anticipating and planning for these transition times may be helpful.
- **Support your child's quick return to school.** The best way to reduce anxiety about school is to address the specific causes of anxiety and help the child return to school as quickly as possible. A shorter school day may help until symptoms improve. Children's symptoms are more likely to decrease when they discover that they can survive the anxiety. Long absences are likely to cause higher levels of anxiety upon returning.
- **Encourage your child's participation in activities that provide a reprieve from worry.**
- **Praise your child's efforts to address symptoms.** Young people often feel that they only hear about their mistakes. Even if improvements are small, every good effort deserves to be praised.
- **Encourage your child to help develop interventions.** Enlisting the child in the task will lead to more successful strategies and will foster the child's ability to problem-solve.

Flexibility and a supportive environment are essential for a student with generalized anxiety disorder to achieve success in school. School faculty and parents together may be able to identify patterns of difficulty and develop remedies to reduce a child's challenges at these times.

For more information or assistance, contact Arnecia Moody, ACPS Lead School Social Worker at 703-619-8156 or talk to their child's school social worker or school counselor. Your school social worker or counselor can provide support and, if needed, a referral to a mental health professional.

Sources

Information provided above on generalized anxiety disorder draws from sources including:

- American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th Edition. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994
- Bostic, JQ and Bagnell, A. "School Consultation." In *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry, 8th Edition*. Kaplan, BJ and Sadock, VA. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2004
- Dulcan, MK and Martini, DR. *Concise Guide to Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2nd Edition*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1999