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Anxiety in Children

When children feel anxious much of the time, or when their anxiety is disproportionate to the situation, there may be a bigger problem. Here's how to help children with anxiety.

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Anxiety is Normal

Stress and anxiety are a normal part of life for children and adults. Moderate anxiety helps children push themselves to succeed at home and in school. It is normal to feel anxious when taking a test or performing in the school play. We expect children to be nervous at the doctor's office or when faced with a new situation. But when children are anxious all the time, or when their anxiety is disproportionate to the situation, there may be a bigger problem.

Primary or Secondary?

Seeking an accurate diagnosis is the first step to developing an appropriate treatment plan for anxiety. A doctor should determine whether the anxiety is **primary** or **secondary**. If a child has had difficulty regulating stress and anxiety since early childhood, and his anxiety is pervasive, it is **primary**. On the other hand, an anxiety disorder can be caused by difficulties related to ADHD or a learning disability. This type of anxiety is thought to be **secondary** to the other disorder.

How to Treat?

For children whose anxiety is secondary to their ADHD, treatment might ultimately include behavioral therapy, medication, or family counseling. But before looking into those options, there are a few simple techniques parents can try that are effective for many children who struggle with ADHD and anxiety.

Try to Understand the Fears

Before you try and "fix" the fear, listen carefully to your child as she explains what's bothering her. Don't jump to conclusions — and don't assume that saying, "Don't worry" will help. For children too young to articulate fears, it may be helpful to have them draw a picture.

Ask the Child to Consider the Fear in Detail

You might ask him to rate his fear on a 10-point scale, or ask him what triggers the scary thoughts. Does anger or loneliness accompany the fear? Do not discount the worry. Acknowledge the feelings while giving the child information; age-appropriate books on the worrisome topic can help.

Devise a Technique the Child Can Use

Your child might imagine writing words on a blackboard — and then erasing them. Or he might imagine burying words in a hole or sealing them in a rocket and then blasting it into space. A younger child might feel better by having a favorite puppet repeat "Be gone" or another incantation.

Ask the Child How They'd Make the Situation Less Fearsome

If a child dreads a social event because "no one I know will be there," you might offer to invite a friend to come along. Or you might devise an early exit plan, which can give a child some control over the situation. Talking to your child beforehand can help him sail smoothly through a potential rough spot.

Teach the Child Relaxation Techniques

Yoga, deep breathing, and other self-calming techniques are highly effective. Look into classes for kids offered in your area. Some kids have developed their own ways to calm themselves when worry strikes — hugging a pillow, playing with a pet, or simply holding a favorite toy. Ultimately, it's up to the child to curb his own anxiety.