

Children of Anxiety

Who They Are, and How We Can Help Them

Trying to help children with anxiety after their symptoms present is akin to closing the stable gates after the horses are gone. We need to help them before the problems develop!

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In the past three years, no human problem has become more pronounced than anxiety. Anxiety disorders are the most common form of mental illness in the United States. Anxiety affects over 40 million adults, almost 20% of the population, age eighteen and over each year, and these figures are gathered from individuals who are seeking treatment for the condition. Those percentages are probably much higher. Anxiety tends to develop from a complicated set of risk factors. Those include personality, genetics, brain chemistry, and social and life events.

Most of the information we have about anxiety derives its information from diagnosis and treatment for adults. The reason for this is simple. Adults are more likely to seek treatment for anxiety, since they have a better understanding of their baseline feelings and behaviors, and can make decisions about treating this condition. Adults are more verbal, and have a better grasp on the relationship between what their minds are thinking, what their emotions are feeling, and their physical concerns.

Child's Play - On Adult Terms

Children, on the other hand, have not developed enough emotionally and intellectually to understand what is happening to them when the anxiety demon rears its ugly head. They do not possess enough life experiences to draw on information that may help them to define what is happening to them. As a result, they do not efficiently communicate that they are feeling anxious, and what is happening to them on physical, emotional, and intellectual levels. And we, as adults, do not understand how to help them comprehend what is happening to them before it becomes a problem for them, or, for that matter, when it reaches the crisis point.

The research and treatment methodologies available to you discuss how to understand **when** your child is experiencing anxiety. It focuses on behavioral changes such as isolation, anger, and other forms of acting out. It makes reference to concerns like eating and sleeping difficulties, concentration and focus issues,

worrimment, crying, and emotional clinging. The research will also make reference to separation anxiety, and social anxiety. Have you noticed that all of these are also adult manifestations of anxiety. You see, we have a tendency to attempt to diagnose and treat childhood anxiety using the same identifiers and treatment modalities that we do for adults.

Whereas there is clinical validity in this approach, it can have disastrous effects since by the time adults, by way of their observations, realize that these changes are occurring, and are able to arrange for some of the necessary treatment modalities to help their children, the condition has already progressed, at times to the point of crisis. In short, we are allowing the condition to advance, and then treating it in retrospect. This is simply not acceptable. Since children do not yet possess the ability to communicate that something is wrong, that communication system must be presented by parents, and other significant adults in their lives.

Talking The Talk

If you are going to gently and efficiently communicate with your children to help them understand if and when anxiety begins to affect their lives, it is essential that you understand how to approach the communicative system. There are three initial rules that you must follow to help you make this an approach that can help your children.

First, set time aside routinely to communicate with your children about what they are thinking and feeling. This must be something you really want to do. Parents tend to be sporadic when it comes to the way they communicate with their children. They typically don't do it enough, and when they do, it seems as though they're on the clock, and want to get the exercise finished quickly. So the first rule is to *want to talk to your children, to enjoy doing so, and to be willing to spend as much time as possible to communicate with them.*

Second, *talk every day, and talk about everything.* The conversation doesn't only have to be about the potentiality of anxiety in their lives. It should also be about everyday things that they are thinking about and experiencing. You see, the trick is to know everything you can about your child. That will establish the necessary baseline which will help you to quickly determine if anything maybe bothering them when that time comes. Once you have that baseline established, any deviations will be quickly identified.

Third, *be specific with what you are asking, and do not let them give you quick answers like good, fine, and everything's OK.* Remember, you're not just talking. You are communicating. That's about eye contact, body language, linguistic nuances, and even avoidance behaviors. When you leave the conversation, you should be able to say that any questions you had when the conversation began were answered to your satisfaction. If they're struggling with their answers, they may give a sign that they are either keeping information from you, or simply not know how to communicate it. This is where they may need some additional help.

Simple steps to enhance your communication with your child

- Talk to them in a safe, relaxed environment
- Use good eye contact, and communicate in a smooth easy flow
- Use clear concise statements keep, and your volume low
- Listen to everything they have to say, and don't interrupt them
- Use reinforcing statements, and validate what they are telling you to let them know that what they have to say is important to you
- When possible, use a soothing tender voice
- Go into the discussion open and relaxed
- Never be critical. Remember, if they're dealing with anxiety, critical statements can hurt.
- Set aside all the time that is necessary to talk with them. Never rush.
- Your children are the most important part of your life. Always let them feel that they are.
- Start your discussion with them with statements of warmth and love, and conclude your discussion the same way

Other items that are important when it comes to assessing whether or not your child may be experiencing anxiety, or may experience it in the near distant future is to examine family genetic history. If possible, determine if family, both paternal and maternal have had anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues in their lives. If this is the case, it may increase the possibility that it will make its way into your own family. Also, be willing to check in with teachers, coaches, and other significant people in their lives. Sometimes, children will communicate additional information to these people, and that will help you add to the body of information that is so important to determining the mental health of your own

children. Even though your children may still be young, schedule a wellness visit with your physician, at least once per year.

When you do talk to your children, it might make sense to jot down what they are saying for future reference. For those of you who do journal, or are willing to keep a journal, this will help you see some of the changes they are experiencing as they are evolving. At the very least, keep a list of what they are saying, and review that list often. This may sound like a little more work than you bargained for, but it's back to the old story. You are going to put the time in with your child one way or another. Anxiety is a horrible condition that can decimate a young life long before adulthood. Be willing to put the time in now. It can help you avoid a tremendous amount of suffering on the part of your child, and all of the therapeutic intervention that will be necessary to address the anxiety demon's damage.

Nothing in the world should be more important than our children. Anxiety is a condition that will affect at least 50% of today's children. In a fast-paced society loaded with social and personal pressures, it is so important that we talk to our children long before the symptoms of anxiety become evident. Do show your children how much you love them by your willingness to embrace the time they need for you to spend with them. Learn about them. Let them help you understand who they are. Begin dealing with the potential for anxiety in your own family long before you begin playing catch up.

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