Anxiety in Children

Symptoms and Treatment Approaches for Childhood Anxiety

Agenda

- Symptoms of Anxiety

- Understanding How Children Think

- What Causes Anxiety

- Interventions

Symptoms of Anxiety

Emotional Signs of Anxiety

- Is extremely sensitive

- Irritable

- Afraid of making even minor mistakes, including test anxiety

- Panic attacks

- Phobias (bees, dogs, etc.) and exaggerated fears (fearful of a natural disaster)

- Worries about things that are far in the future

- Frequent nightmares

- Easily distracted by worries

- Compulsive, repetitive behaviors

Behavioral Signs of Anxiety

- Starts having meltdowns or tantrums

- Asks "What if?" constantly

- Avoids participating in group activities

- Remains silent or preoccupied during group work

- Refuses to go to school

- Avoids social situations with peers after school and on weekends

- Becomes emotional or angry when separated from parents

- Constantly seeks approval

- Low self-esteem and efficacy

- Overly concerned about negative evaluations

Physical Signs of Anxiety

- Frequently complains of headaches or stomachaches

- Refuses to eat snacks or lunch at school

- Restless, fidgety, hyperactive

- Difficulty concentrating

- Starts to shake or sweat in intimidating situations

- Dizziness

- Frequent urge to urinate

- Constantly tenses muscles

- Exaggerated startle response

- Trouble falling or staying asleep

- Falls asleep in school

- Repetitive activities (tapping, leg shaking, etc.)

- Nail biting / skin picking

- Rigid routines

Understanding How Children Think

Age: 0-2

Object Permanence

- "If I can't see you, you're not here."

Personal Agency

- Ability to direct actions for given purposes

Age: 2-7

Egocentric

- Believes everyone sees the situation the way they do

Personalized

Concrete / Dichotomous

- All or nothing thinking

Mystical

- Difficulty separating realty from fantasy

Age: 7-11

Inductive

- Start making global attributions from specifics

Age: 11+

More advanced reasoning, but little life experience and often have not questioned prior faulty schema

What Do Children Fear?

- Anything that threatens their biological needs, safety, and sense of love and belonging
  - Death
  - Rejection/Isolation/Abandonment
  - The Unknown
  - Loss of Control

Self-actualization
desire to become the most that one can be

Esteem
respect, self-esteem, status, recognition, strength, freedom

Love and belonging
friendship, intimacy, family, sense of connection

Safety needs
personal security, employment, resources, health, property

Physiological needs
air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing, reproduction

Environmental/Social

- Bullies
- Performance pressure
- Parental enmeshment or disengagement
- Chaotic home environment (abuse/neglect, mental illness, substance use, etc.)
- Social learning
- Social learning and COVID-19

Cognitive/Emotional

- Unhelpful thoughts
- Lack of knowledge
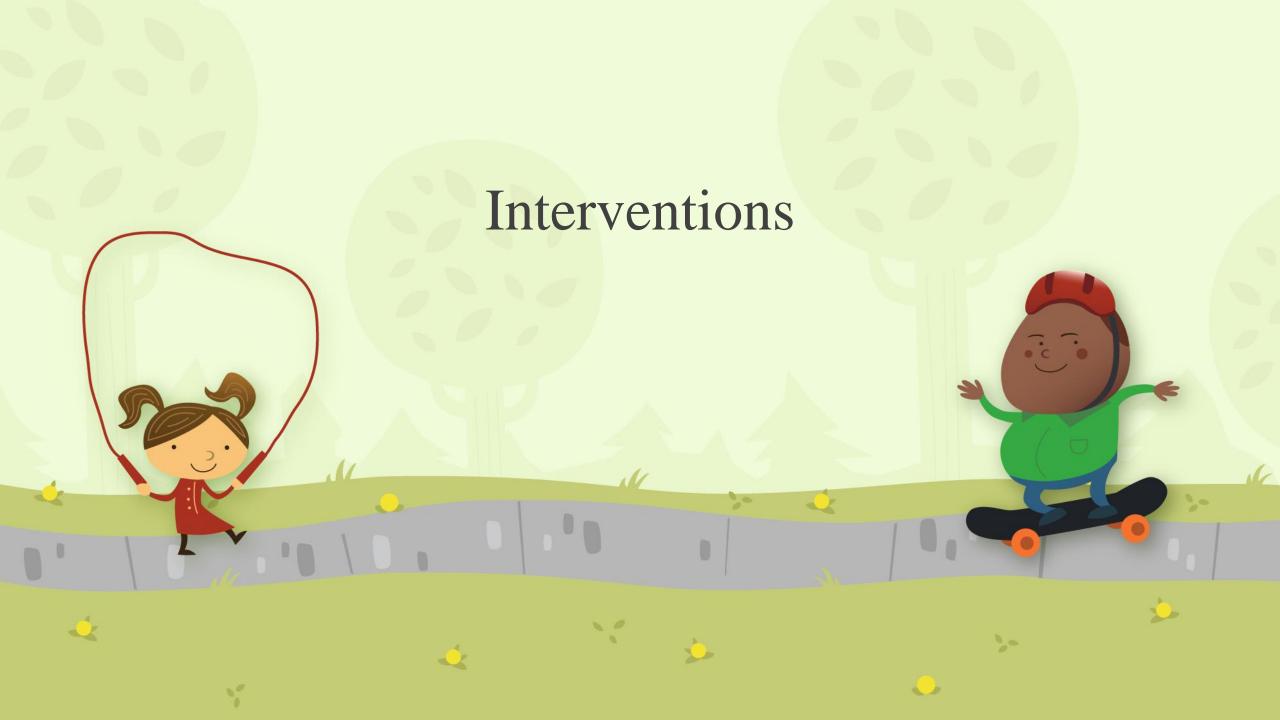- Highly sensitive child

Physical

- Lack of sleep
- Poor nutrition or hunger
- Hormones

What is Causing the Anxiety?

Differential Diagnosis

- Anxiety Disorders (phobias, separation, social, generalized, etc.)

- Depression

- ADD

- Autism

- PTSD / Acute Stress Disorder

- Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Interventions

Age: 0-2

Teach emotional vocabulary and needs identification

- Use feeling faces

- Identify feelings in videos and ask questions about how the character feels

Play games to help with fears

- Hide and seek

- Peek-a-boo

- Play groups

Age: 0-2

Be Responsive

Age: 2-7

Provide structure and consistency

- Daily schedule chart
- Give warning before transitions
  - Verbal
  - Bell
  - Chant/Rhyme
- Ensure children know what's expected
  - Coloring pages
  - Rules chart

Age: 2-7

Teach mindful awareness

- Physical sensations, urges, thoughts associated with emotions

- Teach distress tolerance

    - Deep breathing

    - Positive self-talk

    - Getting support

Age: 2-7

Join them in their reality

- Don't negate their fears, but help them distinguish fantasy from reality

Anxiety monkey

- Guided imagery

- Role play

Age: 2-7

Address distortions to reassure kids they are safe and loved

- All or none
  - I can be mad at your behavior but still love you.
  - Discourage the use of extreme words (i.e. everyone, always)
- Magnification
  - Keep a frequency chart (leaving, trying, going to school) to see the likelihood
  - Minimize exposure to the news (or discussions about the news)

Age: 2-7

Address distortions to reassure kids they are safe and loved

- Personalization
  - Sometimes bad things happen and it's nobody's fault
  - Encourage caregivers to identify their own emotions and why they feel that way

Age: 7-11

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Create a relaxation kit

Talk back

- Boss back

- Thought stopping

- Create a character

Age: 7-11

Mindfulness

Set up a "worry time"

Encourage and model positive self-talk

Make coping cards

Systematic Desensitization

Age: 11+

Research for facts

Write it out

- Write and tear
- Worry journal
- Worry box

Grounding Techniques

Age: 11+

Cognitive restructuring

Find an app

- Headspace
- Three Good Things
- Calm

General Anxiety Management Skills

- Keep blood sugar stable

- Get enough sleep

- Practice positive self-talk

- Check the facts

- Use visualizations

- Deep breathing

- Mindfulness

- Get support from others

- Find mentors/peer supports who have experienced similar things

- Spend 5 minutes each day focusing on the positives

- Remember that just because you feel anxious, doesn't mean the thing is fearsome

Summary

- Children's cognitive, physical, and experiential differences make their anxiety different than that of adults

- Children's symptoms of anxiety also manifest differently with more irritability, defiance, and somatic complaints

- Anxiety disorders are frequently misdiagnosed as ADD, Autism, ODD, and PTSD

- Children's fears often focus on Maslow's lower three tiers: Biological, Safety, Love and Belonging

- Addressing anxiety means helping the child understand, in a developmentally appropriate way, that they will have what they need, they are safe and they will always belong and be loved.