



Why Do Children Worry So Much...?

Understanding Childhood Anxiety

By Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A.

All children experience anxiety, a subjective, perceived sense of worry, fear and distress. Fear and anxiety are a necessary part of life. Whether it's a feeling of anxiety before taking a test, or a feeling of fear while walking down a dark street, normal anxiety can be protective and stimulating. According to a report issued by the National Institute of Mental Health in May, 2006, more than 19 million Americans with anxiety disorders face much more than just "normal" anxiety. Instead, their lives are filled with overwhelming anxiety and fear that can be intense and crippling. Anxiety disorders are real medical illnesses. Brain scientists have shown that anxiety disorders are often related to the biological makeup and life experiences of the individual, and the disorders frequently run in families. Although very common, anxiety disorders in children are often undiagnosed or overlooked, despite being very treatable conditions. Children will experience anxiety many times throughout their lives. One of the most common precursors for anxiety issues is school-related transitions. Starting school and having to separate from parents, or transferring to a new school and separating from friends, are some of the most significant stressors in a child's life. Of course, any transition in a child's life can and will cause significant stress and fears.

It is difficult, but important; to distinguish between normal, "healthy fear" and unhealthy, or pathological, levels of anxiety. It is normal for a child in their toddler years (8 months-preschool) to experience intense distress when separated from a parent or caregiver. Likewise, children who have fears of the dark, thunder or animals (short-lived stressors) are very much the norm. Anxiety, when severe, can negatively affect a child's ability to think and perceive his environment. This can affect concentration, learning and the decision-making ability. Physically, stress can wreak havoc on the body, and cause nausea, vomiting, stomachaches, diarrhea, shortness of breath and weakness, to name a few symptoms. Diagnosis of normal versus abnormal anxiety is largely determined by the degree to which the child's life is affected and disrupted within the context of the child's age and developmental level.

Severe anxiety problems in children can be treated, and the earlier the interventions, the better the prognosis. Parents often hope the child will "just grow out of it." Unfortunately, just the opposite is quite likely, and without real help, the anxious child will try to avoid the feeling. This avoidance often leads to panic disorders, loss of friendships, failure to reach social and academic potentials and poor self-esteem.

Parents need to understand that anxiety and fear are the same thing. Children who experience anxiety/fear will tell you how they feel unless, or until, they are afraid of ridicule, embarrassment or punishment. Therefore, it is very important that parents do not belittle their children for being scared. You want your child to be able to talk to you about her fears. A common coping strategy for a child is choosing anger over fear. Anger feels better than fear and it gives the illusion of power and control when one is feeling powerless. Parents face special challenges because children with anxiety are often rigid, tense, volatile and exhausting. If you become frustrated and make your child feel bad, she will stop being open and honest with you about how she feels, and then she will try to handle her anxiety herself. This usually means avoiding anything that causes stress, for example, school, friends, and sports. These things are critical to healthy childhood experiences.

So what is a parent to do? Here are a few strategies to use when dealing with an anxiety-ridden child:

Pay attention to what your child is telling you verbally and through his actions. This is not about how you think he should feel, but rather, what he is perceiving and feeling. Try to be understanding, and keep listening and talking to your child. Instead of down-playing his fear; try to help him rationalize it.

Play the "what if game." Ask your child: "What if that happened, and if it did, then what?" "And what would be the worst thing that could happen then?" Talk about the real possibilities versus the perceived possibilities. Empower your child with alternative thoughts and choices.

Seek out a qualified mental health counselor and/or doctor. Treatment is very favorable, and early intervention means more successful recovery.

Educate yourself. If your child has an anxiety condition, learn about it; reading self-help books is one way of doing this. Also learn about stress management and anger management. Be open to new ideas, and your child will be, too.

Learn about relaxation techniques. Take a yoga class with your child.

Walk together. Exercise is great for anxiety, mood and general health.

Encourage hobbies and interests. Even children with anxiety disorders need to experience childhood. Fun is relaxation. Hobbies and discovered talents help build confidence and self-esteem, both of which are critical for successful recovery.

Help your child develop a support system. Communication and support are critical in alleviating stress and anxiety. Foster healthy friendships with age-appropriate peers and adult role models. This is important for you as well. Remember you are always your child's first role model and mentor.

Surprising though it may be, most children who suffer from separation anxiety disorder tend to come from close-knit families. Researchers are still looking for the precise role of both genes and the environment in this disorder; it is clear that both play a significant role. As parents, we need to really take a look at our own issues and struggles. It is not uncommon for a child who suffers from anxiety disorder to have a parent who also has difficulty dealing with stress and fears. Your child gauges responses to situations based on what she sees you do, and how you cope. If you are having, or have had difficulties, seek the necessary supports and counseling, so you can assist your child in developing into the person he or she was meant to be.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with some "tools" that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article, please contact me: Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor at I. E. Counseling 908-456-1871 or email me at hkbrogan@iecounseling.com

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