

## ***When to Worry About Worrying: Signs of Excessive Anxiety in Children***

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When asked what was bothering him Carl said " I'm a worry wart. I worry about everything. After I go to a movie I worry if it (something frightening) will happen even if I know it isn't real."

In talking with Mary about taking tests in school she said "I don't know what happens to me. I study until I am sure that I know everything but when I take the test, I can't remember anything. I don't know what I am writing. Later when I get the test back, I can't believe what I wrote."

A teacher shares that he asks a particularly anxious student, Paul, questions that he is sure Paul knows, but the student just doesn't respond. "The best way I can describe it is that he is just shutting down," said the teacher.

The anxiety that these children and others experience is real. For many children the anxiety is so great that they are dealing with it continually. Unfortunately this struggle is not always noticed, particularly if children are making academic progress and are compliant in school.

### **Normal Worries in Childhood**

- Fears are common in childhood. The youngest children have many fears and these decline with age. Girls admit to more fears than boys, but this may be a cultural phenomenon in that it may be easier for girls to admit to fears. The kinds of things that frighten children change with age. Anxiety after all is a normal human emotion. It undoubtedly had significant survival function at one time in human history. Anxiety is an important emotion. A little tension can drive students to work hard, a little tension can help students focus when taking tests, and a little anxiety can prevent impulsive decision making. A little anxiety can help children and adolescents hesitate long enough to prevent them from injuring themselves, embarrassing themselves or hurting someone else. Anxiety is human and helpful.

### **How Do You Know When There is Too Much Stress?**

- It is difficult to know when a child is experiencing too much stress. School teachers do not often refer children to school psychologists for this reason. Parents tend to refer children to school psychologists for anxiety-related problems more than teachers do. There are some questions to ask yourself which might be helpful in determining whether your child is under too much stress. You might ask the following questions:

- Is this degree of anxiety typical of a child at this age or is it excessive?
- Is the anxiety tied to one event or one type of situation?
- Has my child always been anxious or is this something new?
- Is there anything going on right now which would explain my child's anxiety?
- Is the anxiety interfering with my child's ability to be successful or to be happy?
- Are expectations reasonable for my child?

- These questions might allow you to evaluate the level of anxiety that your child seems to be experiencing and whether or not your child has the coping strategies necessary to deal with the anxiety.

- Some childhood anxiety is tied to specific situations or times. For example, some children are highly anxious about attending school for the first time. They may be anxious about separating from a parent. A moderate level of anxiety in this situation is developmentally appropriate. Children who have difficulty with this transition however, may have difficulty with other transitions. If the anxiety is so frequent and severe that your child avoids situations, feels ill or does not function well, then you need to seek additional help. Anxiety associated with separations can disappear and then reappear without warning.

- Some children experience anxiety when they are asked to talk in front of the whole class, when making an oral presentation. This type of anxiety is typical as well. Nevertheless, it is not typical for the student to feel so much anxiety that he or she avoids the situation altogether or feels sick. Parents should be concerned when a student doesn't want to attend even pleasant functions for fear of embarrassment.

- Anxiety associated with taking tests is helpful if it is not too strong. However, in some children like Mary anxiety can interfere with taking tests in school. When anxiety is too strong it can lower a student's scores on tests. Test anxiety is not confined to children who have difficulty in school, high achievers also might experience anxiety related to unrealistic parental, peer or self-imposed expectations for very high performance. (Williams, 1996). Test anxiety is often triggered when students feel that their performance will not match their peer group's performance.

- Symptoms of severe anxiety in children are more common than was previously thought to be the case. It is important to remember that some children who do not have an identifiable anxiety disorder may experience significant difficulty functioning as a result of anxiety. At the same time it is important to realize that there is a high number of students with anxiety disorders in the general population who have not yet been identified. (Bernstein, Borchardt & Perwien, 1996).

### **What Is It Like For Students Who are Overanxious?**

- Students who are overanxious like Carl, tend to experience very uncomfortable feelings. These feelings can be intolerable. These children can have one of many different symptoms, such as muscle tightness, being tired, acting irritable, inattentiveness, and have breathing and sleeping difficulties. They are tired because they are working overtime to control their emotions. They might be irritable because they can't relax or feel happy as a result of overwhelming anxiety. >

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They might be inattentive because they experience random thoughts that pull them away from what is going on around them. (Bruno, 1993).

- Students who are overanxious tend to worry about virtually everything. They particularly worry about situations or events that have not happened, although they also worry about things that they may have said or done in the past. They may worry about peers, sports or academics. Parents describe them as "little worriers". (Albano, 1996). They may worry about their parents health and other family matters that they hear about. They worry about being "good" at skills and activities and may worry about this to the point of being described as perfectionistic. These children may place exceedingly high expectations on themselves and worry that they don't meet the standards they set. They might need frequent reassurance and tend to be self conscious.

- Children who worry think differently than other students. They tend to focus on the negative possibilities in life and exaggerate what bad things might happen. They underestimate their ability to cope with anxiety, and often need frequent reassurances from adults.

### How Do Overanxious Children Get That Way?

- Family predisposition's appear to be present in cases of the children who are more severely disabled by anxiety. In addition, some inhibited children (but not all) may be at risk for anxiety disorders. Children who have inappropriate emotional attachments to caretakers may be more at risk for developing anxiety. A mix of biological and psychological vulnerability may result in these children having a weak ability to cope with anxiety. They may have not learned to control emotions, and some seem to have experienced significant stress when very young. Adolescence seems to be the peak period for diagnosing anxiety disorders (Bernstein, Borchardt & Perwien, 1996).

### Do Children Experience Anxiety Disorders?

- Anxiety disorders are the most common and most prevalent category of disorders diagnosed in school aged children. Nonetheless, less than 20% of all of the children who need help with anxiety actually receive help with anxiety. Even when a diagnosis is made, anxiety might be diagnosed as occurring with a disorder such as Attention Deficit Disorder and the latter often receives the focus of treatment (Huberty, 1992).

There are nine different anxiety disorders that might be identified in children. These disorders don't often persist for many years. They may get worse or appear more like depression as a student gets older. Anxiety and depression often co-occur so that it is helpful at times to think of a student as experiencing generalized emotional distress (Laurent, Landau & Stark, 1993). Currently children must exhibit at least one physiological symptom such as muscle tension, sweating, trembling, stomachaches or headaches, in order to be diagnosed with a generalized anxiety disorder (Albano, Chorpita & Barlow, 1996). Research suggests that this might be problematic because children with anxiety disorders do not seem to report significantly more physiological symptoms than their peers (Laurent, Landau & Stark, 1993). Unfortunately, this suggests that some very anxious children may not be diagnosed with anxiety-related problems, and therefore not receive the assistance they need.

### What Can Parents Do to Help Anxious Children?

- There are a number of things that parents can do to help children who are overanxious. Consistency is very important in helping these children. Consistency of management, discipline and family scheduling are both important. Parents need to have realistic goals and expectations for anxious children. Setting goals too high can be stressful rather than motivating. In fact, expectations that are too high can have the opposite of their intended effect and lead to avoidance and withdrawal of effort.

- Parents can allow children to share anxieties and worries but it is important to also give children strategies for coping with anxiety. Strategies that help academic worries include organizational strategies, such as breaking large tasks down into a series of very small steps and repeating directions slowly. Social strategies that are helpful include suggesting that a child play near a group imitating what the group is playing rather than asking to play with the group. Another strategy is to approach a child who is playing alone. Oftentimes, it is easier for an inhibited child to enter a play situation by offering a toy to another child than to make a verbal request to play.

- It is important that parents model coping with anxiety rather than giving in to it. Parents need to take care not to unknowingly precipitate anxiety or reward it. Children who are overanxious, easily over stimulated, and reactive in stressful situations need more affection than they appear to need. They also are best managed by parents who do not overprotect them (which is very easy to do with a fearful child).

- When an anxious child appears to be relaxed, it is very helpful to make a comment such as, "You are so relaxed when you are drawing." An occasional reward when children learn to relax at tasks that previously made them anxious is helpful as well. Children need to identify when they are getting anxious "Feel how tight your shoulders are right now", and be given quick relaxation strategies to put in place such as "Count backwards from ten and breath out slowly from your nose".

### What If This Isn't Enough?

- Some children will need the help of a professional school psychologist in order to learn to cope with anxiety. It is critical that an anxious child have someone to talk to, and who can teach coping strategies. School psychologists often work with parents and teachers in teaching children how to cope with anxiety because it one thing to teach a strategy, but making sure that the child practices it often enough to internalize the skills requires teamwork.

- A school psychologist might utilize a variety of strategies depending on the type of anxiety disorder that a child is experiencing. Techniques that help a child gradually deal with an anxiety provoking situation might be used for one child, quickly reintroducing a child to an anxiety-provoking situation might be used in another case. Children might be taught one of several types of relaxation strategies. Children might be given a number of quick strategies such as teaching a child to say "re" while breathing in slowly and "lax" as he or she breaths out slowly through the nose.

- Because thoughts can cause anxiety, the school psychologist will teach a child to change what he or she is thinking. Children will be taught to substitute negative thoughts with positive, encouraging and hopeful thoughts. Children will learn to say and then think statements such as "I can handle this, I am getting better at it every day," or "I will take a breath and calm down, then begin at the beginning by reading the directions." Children will be taught to challenge self criticism and to challenge the "I'll nevers" ("I'll never be able to learn this").

Children who avoid anxiety-provoking situations might be taught to say "I'll try... it may take a while but I will take the first step". Or, these children might be given specific social skills training and then rewarded for trying out the skills on the playground. Older students might be given information about the dangers of attempting to decrease their anxiety with sugar, alcohol or other drugs. Finally if needed, the school psychologist would make a referral to the family physician for evaluation and determination of need for medical treatment.