

A Caregiver's Guide to Childhood Anxiety



A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step. - Lao Tzu

Anxiety is a disorder that can be found in children and teens. There are several types of anxiety disorders, all of which have different symptoms and experiences. Anxiety Disorders should not be left untreated. When ignored, they can lead to other psychological disorders, including depression, and can seriously disrupt your child's daily life with school and personal relationships. The following guide discusses what anxiety is and what childhood anxiety disorders can look like; what you can expect from therapy, treatment and medications; and what you can do to help with your child's treatment.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is defined as an emotional state in which someone has worried thoughts, feelings of tension and physical changes, such as increased heart rate or blood pressure.ⁱ

- Children with anxiety disorders have repeated and unwanted thoughts or concerns that are paired with other physical symptoms such as: sweating, dizziness, increased heartbeats, and shaking or trembling or the feeling of butterflies in their stomach ⁱⁱ
- Anxiety disorders differ from one another and each person experiences it differently. It is normal for children to go through phases; however, anxiety disorders in children consist of having an intense fear or anxiety over a particular situation or place and/or having continuous worry over certain situations, such as school or social situations.
- *The following are anxiety disorders that can be found in children. Be sure to ask your child's clinician for further information regarding specific disorders.*
 - Childhood Anxiety Disorders, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Panic Disorder, Separation Anxiety Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, Selective Mutism, and Specific Phobiasⁱⁱⁱ

What does the future hold?

There is help for children with anxiety disorders. Because there are many types of anxiety of anxiety disorders it is important to work with professionals to understand the treatment plan that is specific to the child's need. Treatment attendance is very important because active participation in effective treatment can diminish symptoms of anxiety disorders and decrease the onset or recurrence of depression.^{iv v}

Treatment for Childhood Anxiety

Treatment is essential for children with Anxiety Disorders and can consist of both psychotherapy and medication. Keep in mind, every child is different and no one treatment plan works for everyone.

Psychotherapy is another word for counseling and is carried out by professional and licensed clinicians and psychiatrists. This is a procedure in which the professional sits down with your child individually or sometimes in a group setting. Techniques can include: ^{vi vii}

- Teaching you and your child about anxiety disorders and what it means.
- Relaxation, meditation and deep breathing.

- Talking about and helping your child understand his or her own thoughts and fears that cause the symptoms of anxiety. When talking about these thoughts, the therapist is able to change them and help your child think differently.
- Encouraging your child to pay attention to his or her thoughts, feelings, and behavior and to connect those to feelings of anxiety.
- Learning techniques to change his or her negative thought patterns.
- Slowly exposing your child to his or her fears and to what causes him or her to feel anxious.
- *Be sure to speak to your child's clinician or psychiatrist to receive more detailed information on the type of therapy he/she is using with your child and/or family.*

Medication is typically used alongside a form of psychotherapy (listed above) as it can be really helpful in improving your child's thoughts and feelings.^{viii} It is important to do your best at feeling hopeful and supporting the decisions made by the clinicians and doctors as this will really help your child. *Most importantly, be sure to discuss the use of medication with the clinician or psychiatrist and ask them to provide with you information on your child's specific medication. This should include: how much your child should take per day, what the medication is aimed to improve and the possible negative side effects.*

How Can You Help?

Caregivers often want to know how they can help their child and how they can contribute to their child's progress. The following are some tips that other caregivers have found helpful. Keep in mind they might not all be right for you and your family but it may be helpful to give a few of these a try. ^{ix x xi}

- **Education.** Stay educated on what anxiety disorders are, how it affects all children and how it affects your child in particular. Be informed of your child's treatment plan and assist your child with taking their medications. Help your child understand what anxiety is and what the treatment process (therapy, etc.) will be. Be comfortable and open with the clinician to guarantee the best care possible for your child.
- **Creating support systems.** Help inform everyone who lives in your home about anxiety disorders and what is going on with your child in order to create a strong family support for your child. Find people that you trust and can confide in to help you with transportation to appointments, taking care of other family members and for emotional support as well.
- **Stay involved with school.** Childhood anxiety can directly affect your child's progress in school. If you inform the necessary school staff of your child's anxiety disorder, they can help keep him/her safe and supported when you are not around.
- **Stay calm.** Remember to stay calm during the times where your child is experiencing anxiety. They will need support and guidance during those difficult times.
- **Take care of yourself.** Know your limits and seek support if you need it. Join support groups, check out community services and seek professional help for yourself if you think it would be helpful. You are your child's source of support and comfort so feeling your best will help your child to feel his or her best!
- **Create a calm and positive environment at home.** Make sure that your home is a safe place for your child and the rest of your family. Have meals together, take walks as a family and spend more positive time together. Anxiety disorders in children can cause extra stress on the family.
- **Don't place blame.** Blaming yourself, your child or anyone else will not help the situation. Be supportive in any way possible and don't feel guilty about what your child is going through. Don't punish anyone if they make mistakes or if you don't see progress being made.
- **Develop routines and structures.** Changes in routine are inevitable if your child begins treatment of any kind. Do your best to stay organized with appointments, medication, work, and social plans with friends and family. Remember to stay flexible and allow extra time for your child during transitions.

- **Reduce stress.** You may laugh at this one, but it is true. The less stress you have in your life, the better off everyone will be. Continue doing things you love and be sure to stay healthy (exercise and eat healthy foods).
- **Be proud of yourself.** This is a difficult time. You are already on the right path just by staying informed and involved in your child's life!

ⁱ Anxiety. (2013). *American Psychological Association*. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from

<http://www.apa.org/topics/anxiety/index.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Anxiety. (2013). *American Psychological Association*. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from

<http://www.apa.org/topics/anxiety/index.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ Childhood Anxiety Disorders. (2010-2013). *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*.

Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from <http://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/childhood-anxiety-disorders>

^{iv} Frequently Asked Questions. (2014). *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

Retrieved on January 23, 2015 from

http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Anxiety_Disorder_Resource_Center/FAQ.aspx#anxietyfaq4

^v Practice Parameter for the Assessment and Treatment of Children and Adolescents with

Depressive Disorders. (November 2007). *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

Retrieved on January 23, 2015 from

http://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/docs/practice_parameters/depressive_disorders_practice_parameter.pdf

^{vi} Anxiety Disorders and Effective Treatment. (June 2010). *American Psychological Association*.

Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/anxiety-treatment.aspx>

^{vii} Anxiety Disorders. (April 2012). *National Alliance on Mental Illness*. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from

http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=142543

^{viii} Children. (2012). *American Psychiatric Association*. Retrieved October 3, 2013 from

<http://www.psychiatry.org/mental-health/people/children>

^{ix} Taking Care of You: Self-Care for Family Caregivers. *Family Caregiver Alliance*. Retrieved on

October 3, 2013 from http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=847

^x Tips for Parents and Caregivers. (2010-2013). *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*.

Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from <http://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/tips-parents-and-caregivers>

^{xi} Anxiety Disorders at School. (2010-2013). *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*.

Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from <http://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/anxiety-disorders-school>