



Anxiety in children

Just like adults, children and young people feel worried and anxious at times.

But if your child's anxiety is starting to affect their wellbeing, they may need some help.

What makes children anxious?

Children can feel anxious about different things at different ages. Many of these worries are a normal part of growing up.

From the age of around 6 months to 3 years it's very common for young children to have separation anxiety. They may become clingy and cry when separated from their parents or carers. This is a normal stage in a child's development and should stop at around age 2 to 3.

It's also common for preschool-age children to develop specific fears or phobias. Common fears in early childhood include animals, insects, storms, heights, water, blood and the dark. These fears usually go away gradually on their own.

There may also be other times in a child's life when they feel anxious. For example, many children feel anxious when going to a new school or before tests and exams. Some children feel shy in social situations and may need support with this.

Starting secondary school can also be difficult. The school is bigger, your child has to make new friends and is responsible for managing their day.

When is anxiety a problem for children?

Anxiety becomes a problem for children when it starts to get in the way of their everyday life.

If you go into any school at exam time, all the children will be anxious, but some may be so anxious that they do not manage to get to school that morning.

Anxiety can start to cause problems for your child when:

- it's very strong, or getting worse, and does not go away
- it gets in the way of daily activities, stopping your child doing things they enjoy

Severe anxiety like this can harm children's mental and emotional wellbeing, affecting their self-esteem and confidence. They may become withdrawn and go to great lengths to avoid things or situations that make them feel anxious.

What are the signs of anxiety in children?

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. You may notice that they:

- become irritable, tearful or clingy
- have difficulty sleeping
- wake in the night
- start wetting the bed
- have bad dreams
- often have stomach aches or headaches

In older children you may notice that they:

- lack confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems with sleeping or eating
- have angry outbursts
- have a lot of negative thoughts, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public or going to school

Find out more about the symptoms of anxiety on our page about [anxiety disorders in children](#).

Why is my child anxious?

Some children are more likely to have worries and anxiety than others. They often find change difficult and may become anxious following a house move or when starting a new school.

Children who have had a distressing or traumatic experience, such as a car accident or house fire, may have anxiety afterwards.

Family arguments and conflict can also make children feel insecure and anxious.

At school, children may feel anxious about things like school work, their teachers, bullying or being lonely. They might struggle with things like the noise of other children in the school.

Teenagers are more likely to have social anxiety than other age groups, avoiding social gatherings or making excuses to get out of them.

Find out more about [social anxiety](#).

How to help an anxious child

If a child is experiencing anxiety, there are things that parents and carers can do to help.

First and foremost, it's important to talk to your child about their anxiety or worries. Listen to them carefully to understand their feelings.

Try not to make assumptions or dismiss their worries. Reassure them that recognizing and talking about problems is good, and show them you understand how they feel.

If your child is old enough, it may help to explain what anxiety is and the physical effects it has on our bodies.

Describe anxiety as a natural reaction to stress that affects our thoughts, feelings and behaviour. It may be helpful to describe anxiety as being like a wave that builds up and then goes away again.

As well as talking to your child about their worries and anxiety, it's important to help them find solutions to their worries.

For example, if your child is worried about going to a sleepover, talk to them and get them to make a plan involving a close friend or another parent being there. This can help with problem-solving and confidence.

If your child is worried about school, you can work with them and the school to identify the problem and find solutions together.

This might include getting support from a peer mentor, or avoiding a noisy playground by coming in early to help tidy the classroom. Most schools offer quiet or safe spaces for anxious pupils.

It can help to:

- talk with your child to find out what makes them feel anxious. It could be certain times or situations
- think of ways to find solutions to make things better at home and school
- set up a meeting with your child's teacher or SENCO (special education needs co-ordinator)

It's important to acknowledge their anxiety and find helpful ways of dealing with it. Do not force your child into a stressful situation without talking to them about what's making them anxious first. This could make the problem worse.

If your child is really struggling and it's affecting their everyday life, it might be good to talk to your GP or school nurse.

Other ways to ease anxiety in children

- teach your child to recognise signs of anxiety in themselves
- encourage your child to manage their anxiety and ask for help when they need it
- children of all ages find routines reassuring, so try to stick to regular daily routines where possible
- if your child is anxious because of distressing events, such as a bereavement or separation, look for books or films that will help them to understand their feelings and realise it's normal to feel sad or anxious in these situations
- if you know a change, such as a house move, is coming up, prepare your child by talking to them about what is going to happen and why
- prepare your child for change before they move from primary to secondary school and then give them extra support when they begin secondary
- try not to become overprotective or anxious yourself
- practise simple relaxation techniques with your child, such as taking 3 deep, slow breaths, breathing in for a count of 3 and out for 3
- distraction can be helpful for young children. For example, if they are anxious about going to nursery, play games on the way there, such as seeing who can spot the most red cars
- turn an empty tissue box into a "worry" box. Get your child to write about or draw their worries and "post" them into the box. Then you can sort through the box together at the end of the day or week

Find out more: Click on the links to find out more.

- [Young Minds: supporting your child with anxiety](#)
- [Health for Teens: practical advice about dealing with anxiety](#)
- [Anna Freud: let's talk about anxiety \(YouTube video\)](#)
- [Anna Freud: seven ways to support children and young people who are worried](#)
- [Mentally Healthy Schools: anxiety](#)

When should we get help?

If your child's anxiety is severe, persists and interferes with their everyday life, it's a good idea to get some help.

A visit to a GP is a good place to start. If your child's anxiety is affecting their school life, it's a good idea to talk to their school as well. Support from trusted adults who your child knows can really help them overcome these challenges.

Find out how to get [mental health support for children and young people](#).

Parents and carers can get help and advice about children's mental health from Young Minds' free parent helpline on 0808 802 5544, from Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 4pm.

Find out more about treatments on our page about [anxiety disorders in children](#).

More in Advice for parents

[Children and bereavement](#)

[Helping your child with anger issues](#)

[Anxiety disorders in children](#)

[Depression in children and young people](#)

[Talking to your child about feelings](#)

[Teen aggression and arguments](#)

[Coping with your teenager](#)

[Worried about your teenager?](#)

[Help your child beat exam stress](#)