

# Anxiety disorders in children

It's normal for children to feel worried or anxious from time to time – such as when they're starting school or nursery, or moving to a new area.

But for some children, anxiety affects their behaviour and thoughts every day, interfering with their school, home and social life.

This is when you may need professional help to tackle it.

## Symptoms of anxiety in children

Signs to look out for in your child are:

- finding it hard to concentrate
- not sleeping, or waking in the night with bad dreams
- not eating properly
- quickly getting angry or irritable, and being out of control during outbursts
- constantly worrying or having negative thoughts
- feeling tense and fidgety, or using the toilet often
- always crying
- being clingy
- complaining of tummy aches and feeling unwell

Separation anxiety is common in younger children, whereas older children and teenagers tend to worry more about school or have social anxiety.

## How to help your anxious child

If your child is having problems with anxiety, there's plenty you can do to help.

Above all, it's important to talk to your child about their anxiety or worries.

It's a good idea to seek professional help if your child is constantly anxious and:

- it's not getting better, or is getting worse
- self-help isn't working
- it's affecting their school or family life, or their friendships

## Where to get help for anxiety

An appointment with your GP is a good place to start.

You can talk to the GP on your own or with your child, or your child might be able to have an appointment without you.

If the GP diagnoses your child with an anxiety disorder, they may refer them to the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). CAMHS workers are trained to help young people with a wide range of problems, including anxiety.

## Treatments for anxiety disorders in children

The type of treatment offered will depend on your child's age and the cause of their anxiety.

**Counselling** can help your child understand what's making them anxious and allow them to work through the situation.

**Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** is a talking therapy that can help your child manage their anxiety by changing the way they think and behave.

**Anxiety medicines** may be offered to your child if their anxiety is severe or doesn't get better with talking therapies. They are usually only prescribed by doctors who specialise in child and adolescent mental health.

## What causes anxiety disorders in children

Some children are simply born more anxious and less able to cope with stress than others.

Children can also pick up anxious behaviour from being around anxious people.

Some children develop anxiety after stressful events, such as:

- frequently moving house or school
- parents fighting or arguing
- the death of a close relative or friend
- becoming seriously ill or getting injured in an accident
- school-related issues like exams or bullying
- being abused or neglected

Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autistic spectrum disorders are more likely to have problems with anxiety.

## More information and support

For you

- Mental Health Foundation: The Anxious Child – a booklet for parents and carers
- NICE guideline: social anxiety disorder – treatment for children and young people
- Royal College of Psychiatrists: worries and anxieties – helping children to cope
- YoungMinds Parents Helpline – call 0808 802 5544 (Monday to Friday 9.30am to 4pm, free for mobiles and landlines)