

ANXIETY TIP SHEET - CHILDREN

Signs your child might have anxiety:

Worry about every-day events and problems is frequent, persistent, and excessive

Procrastination and avoidance are used to get out of participating in expected activities (e.g. refusal to get into the car)

Clinginess and separation anxiety

Perfectionism and negative self-criticism, believing that nothing they do will be good enough

Externalizing behaviours such as anger, aggression, restlessness, irritability, tantrums, crying, opposition and defiance

Regularly displaying physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches without any apparent physical cause

Sleep disturbance (e.g. nightmares and night terrors, unable to go to sleep, unable to sleep alone)

Poor memory and concentration

Anxiety causes significant distress and impacts on functioning in everyday life (e.g. child is unable to attend school or community events)

Strategies

Encourage your child to communicate about their worries - Encourage your child to let you know about their worries. If your child struggles with talking or having a conversation they may be able to communicate their concerns through writing, drawing, role play or use of technology. If your child is unable to identify or communicate why they are anxious then adults around them should pay close attention to identify any triggers.

When your child communicates their concerns or worries, you can help by staying calm and acknowledging what they say. It is important that you do not dismiss what the child has to say or make them feel silly for having certain feelings. You can, however, gently challenge unrealistic or overly pessimistic thoughts e.g. "you say you don't have any friends but you have been invited to

two birthday parties this month". Reassure your child that they can continue to let you know about their feelings and that you want to help them to feel calmer and happier. It may be worthwhile identifying a trusted person that your child can speak to at times when you can't be around (e.g. education assistant at school). Sometimes it is possible to help the child to remove the cause of the worry by brainstorming possible solutions and choosing the best one.

It may be useful to help your child to label and understand the different types of feelings that people experience. You can also discuss the ways that people experience feelings "in their body", e.g. gritted teeth, sick in the stomach. Understanding these things can help children to identify their own feelings and react appropriately.

Routines and Environment - It is important to provide children with a consistent, organised and predictable structure in life - it is easier to be calm when you know what to expect and can prepare yourself. You can help a child to know what to expect by providing them with a calendar or a visual schedule of the activities coming up each day. Changes in routine can be a source of anxiety; this can be managed by giving warnings about change in advance or by using a social story to prepare them for what is coming up.

Encourage enjoyable activities and calming activities - Encourage your child to regularly engage in activities that they enjoy, for example playing with a favourite toy, reading a book or playing sport with friends.

Your child may also benefit from learning new relaxation strategies that they can use when they start to feel distressed. This can also help children to feel that they have some control over their anxiety. It is easier for children to learn these strategies when they are feeling calm and receptive.

Low deep breathing – people can reduce their anxiety by becoming aware of their breathing

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(which is fast and shallow when anxious) and learning to modify their breathing to be slower and deeper. This can be practiced with children through modelling (a parent breathes slowly and deeply while the child matches their breathing pattern), or practicing blowing large bubbles.

Progressive muscle relaxation – When people become anxious their muscles become tense and often uncomfortable. This muscle tension can be relieved by practising alternately tensing and relaxing muscles in isolated parts of the body. This is usually done starting with the feet and progressively working upwards to the head and face (e.g. “tense your feet really tight”, hold for 10 seconds, “now relax” and move). This can be done by listening to a recording of instructions. Progressive muscle relaxation can also be combined with meditation, see below.

Meditation or Imaginative activities – Children can learn to manage their own thoughts in a way that will help them to relax. For example, when faced with a stressful or overwhelming situation a child could imagine themselves in a safe place doing an enjoyable activity or imagine themselves putting their worries away in a box where they cannot bother them. Children might also like to develop and name a brave “alter ego” that they can call upon in times of need.

“Sensory” activities – Some children may be calmed by activities that appeal to their different senses. For example listening to calming music or having quiet time, having a warm bath, experiencing deep pressure (e.g. massage) or touching different textures. Each child is different and it is worthwhile determining the types of sensory experiences that seem to calm your child.

Parents can help to comfort children if they are unable to sooth themselves, this may include talking to them and telling them that things are OK or holding, rocking and cuddling them.

Challenge your child to face their fears - Children can become braver with practice. Parents can help

by providing opportunities for them to face their fears in progressively more difficult steps. For example, if a child had a fear of attending school, the first step might be for that child to spend time viewing photographs of their teachers, classroom and school yard. A subsequent step might be for the child to go to the school on a weekend to become familiar with the grounds and layout. A child should be able to manage each step calmly before moving on to the next step. Children may enjoy this process more if they are given praise or other rewards for achieving each step.

Promote your child’s physical health - People tend to have better mental health when they have good physical health. You can promote good physical health by making sure your child has a balanced diet, regular exercise and plenty of sleep.

Look after your own mental health - It is important for parents to be aware of their own anxieties and anxious behaviours’ as children learn how to respond in different situations by observing those around them. With this in mind parents should model brave and confident behaviours (while also modeling cautious behaviours when there are genuine safety concerns).

Consider referral to a mental health professional if you feel that your child’s anxiety continues to have a significant impact on their life despite your best efforts.

Resources

Healthy Families Beyond Blue
<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/home>

Kid’s Help Line: 1800 55 1800
<http://www.kidshelp.com.au>

Youth Mental Health Foundation
www.headspace.org.au

Speak to your GP or school psychologist or contact Rocky Bay for further information - (08) 9383 6113