



Worried Sick, Understanding Anxiety

Almost all children and adolescents have certain fears, worries or uneasiness at different stages of development. Many times, they outgrow their fears, but sometimes, those fears persist and become more magnified and begin to interfere with daily functioning.

Just what is anxiety anyway? It is a subjective sense of worry, apprehension, fear and distress and is the body's natural alarm system. Anxiety has physical, mental and behavioral aspects. Children who are anxious usually experience some physical symptoms (rapid heartbeat, feeling dizzy, shortness of breath, muscle tension, difficulty sleeping). They also experience scary thoughts (can't sleep with the lights off, believes there's a monster under their bed). Anxious children are tense, uptight, fear embarrassment or making mistakes. They tend to worry about things before they ever happen. Anxiety can have an effect on their thinking and decision-making ability and the way they perceive the world. Many times, they are the quite, eager to please kids. Often, they express their anxiety behaviorally by avoiding situations that make them uncomfortable.

Many of our anxious children are often not recognized or are completely mismanaged. This often leads to years of needless suffering by children and their families. According to studies, untreated childhood anxiety disorders lead to depression, increased stresses, social isolation peer neglect/rejection and significant impairment in the school setting. As a result, many children and adolescents suffer from low self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, reduced school and work productivity and increased drug and alcohol use.

Anxiety becomes a disorder when the discomfort or disability significantly interferes with day-to-day living. Physical illness, such as stomachaches for which there is no medical diagnosis, may be a sign of anxiety. Temper tantrums, oppositional behaviors or refusing to be separated from family members are other signs that a child may be anxious. It is important not to discount a child's fears or try to rationalize with them.

Childhood Anxiety Disorders consist of Social Anxiety, Selective Mutism, Separation Anxiety Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Trichotillomania and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Anxiety Disorders are very treatable. There are several approaches to consider...individual therapy, medication, and family therapy. The primary goal of Individual Therapy is to help the child modify the way they think, feel and behave. Misperceptions are confronted and corrected. Anxiety management skills are taught to help a child learn to manage the symptoms of anxiety effectively. Medication can be helpful in some cases. Parenting a son or daughter with anxiety issues is challenging, so family involvement is important so the therapist can educate the child's parents about the disorder and provide them with some guidelines for how to be helpful to their child.