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Anxiety in Children: Helping Your Child Find Peace of Mind

By Lynne Ticknor, M.A.

When my daughter was young, she worried about *everything*. At night, she would repeat questions such as, "Who is bringing snack to preschool tomorrow?" followed by, "What will happen if that person forgets?" Then there were worries about the bus ("What if my bus breaks down?"), the stove ("What will I eat for breakfast if the stove isn't working?") and the blanket ("What if my covers fall off my bed and I get cold?"). I viewed these questions as stall tactics at bedtime until it became clear that she was having these thoughts throughout the entire day. After visiting multiple child health care professionals, I learned that she was suffering from Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Her worries were impacting her daily activities and her ability to enjoy life.



Sometimes it's hard for parents to understand what young children have to worry about. After all, they aren't responsible for paying the mortgage, putting food on the table or responding to the demands of irrational bosses. They don't think about world hunger, terrorism or chronic health conditions. What could a young child possibly worry about? Plenty.

Toddlers (1 to 3 years old)

Toddlers begin to explore the world and venture out of the caregiver's arms. Common fears include:

- **Separation.** Anxiety about separation from the primary caregiver(s) usually starts between 9 and 18 months and can continue past the second birthday. This is also the time when children begin to understand that people and objects can exist even when out of sight (object permanence).
- **Being alone.** Being left alone can be very scary for a young child. Put in a room by himself, the toddler will seek out his caregiver. If the caregiver is not immediately available, most toddlers will become distressed.

- **Darkness.** Because it's difficult to see in the dark, toddlers are unsure what is "out there" and fear the unknown.
- **Weather.** Thunder, lightning, wind and storms can scare children who have limited experience with the sounds and sights of Mother Nature.
- **Toilets and drains.** The flushing sound terrifies many children. They think, "If water goes down the drain or gets flushed away, what prevents me from disappearing if I get too close?"
- **Strangers.** The fear of unfamiliar people, common among toddlers, can be heightened if the stranger is associated with bad experiences. A doctor with a stethoscope or a dentist with a face mask usually means something painful is about to occur.
- **Costumes and masks.** Anyone who looks different can be frightening. Mickey Mouse and Pluto frequently scare children at "The Most Magical Place on Earth" simply because they are costumed characters.
- **Dreams.** Nightmares terrify even the most resilient adults! Enough said.

Preschoolers (3 to 5 years old)

In addition to all of the above, preschoolers have more worries and fears.

- **Monsters.** Since no child has ever had a real encounter with a monster, we can blame images shown on television and in books for this fear. Combined with a preschooler's vivid imagination, it often spells trouble sleeping alone.
- **Preschool or daycare.** Worrying about school is common. Children want to please their teacher, and they also pick up on parents' worries about their performance.
- **Hearing about danger.** Seeing or hearing television news reports or adult conversations about dangerous situations can scare children.
- **Death.** As children learn about dying, they worry that a parent or loved one might suddenly die.
- **Friendship.** Peer relationships become increasingly important during the preschool years. Who will be my friends? What if they don't like me? Who will I sit next to at lunch? These are common thoughts.

How Parents Can Help

The last thing parents want is for our children to feel anxious, worried and stressed. Here are some ways adults can help children feel less worried and cope more effectively with fears.

Model good coping skills. Worrying can be contagious. Studies show that parents who struggle with their own anxiety often raise children who are worried and anxious. Lynn Lyons, a licensed clinical social worker, psychotherapist and author of "Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents," says that anxious parents are six to seven times more likely to have anxious children. Whether it's biological, learned

behavior or a combination, the debilitating result is the same. Keep your own worries in check, and find ways to reduce your fears. Your children take their cues from you and will learn to use similar coping mechanisms.

- **Respond sensitively.** Listen carefully to fully understand your child's experience and be sensitive to his feelings. A study conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) found that parents were alarmingly unaware of their children's worries and that children feel alone with their fears. For a child, worries are real and frightening. Adults, knowing that monsters aren't real, don't understand that children think they are.
- **Enjoy time together.** Spending family time eating meals, relaxing, enjoying social activities, playing and exercising helps children develop resiliency and competence. Teaching and modeling optimism and gratitude also impact children positively.
- **Develop routines.** Experienced parents know that well-established routines are good for children. We are all creatures of habit and most of us love routines. They provide structure and help us stay organized. For children, a day without routines is a day full of unknowns and uncertainty.
- **De-clutter.** Studies show that when a person is entrenched in clutter the stress hormone cortisol is released. Roberta Lee, M.D., vice chairperson of the Department of Integrative Medicine at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City, says that clutter is a major source of stress in our lives today. It suppresses the immune response and makes us feel less in control of our lives. To provide a calming space in your child's room, clear away the clutter.
- **Seek help.** If your child's fears and anxiety start to interfere with normal activities or persist for more than six months, experts suggest seeking professional help. A good child psychologist can use play therapy to help even very young children explore their feelings and develop coping skills now and for the future.

Resources

For children:

- "Is a Worry Worrying You?" by Ferida Wolff and Harriet May Savitz
- "What to Do When You're Scared and Worried: A Guide for Kids" by James J. Crist
- "The Worry Glasses: Overcoming Anxiety" by Donalisa Helsley
- "What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety" by Dawn Huebner and Bonnie Matthews
- "When My Worries Get Too Big!" by Kari Dunn Buron
- "The Huge Bag of Worries" by Virginia Ironside

For Parents:

- "Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous and Independent Children" by Reid Wilson and Lynn Lyons
- "Freeing Your Child from Anxiety" by Tamar Chansky
- "The Worried Child: Recognizing Anxiety in Children and Helping Them Heal" by Paul Foxman
- "The Anxiety Cure for Kids: A Guide for Parents and Children" by Elizabeth DuPont Spencer, Robert L. DuPont and Caroline M. DuPont

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