



Navigating Childhood Anxiety

Strategies for understanding and support

Most of us feel anxious at times. It is normal and expected for your child to feel anxious sometimes as well. For example, your child may worry before a presentation or may feel nervous about making new friends on the first day of school. Low levels of anxiety can even be helpful—they can improve focus, problem-solving skills, and help us recognize potential dangers.

However, if your child's anxiety becomes more intense or frequent, it may affect their ability to participate in everyday activities at school or at home. This could indicate a mental health problem that needs additional support.

This resource was developed to help parents and caregivers understand anxiety, what it is, when it may become problematic, and how and where to seek support if needed.

Note: While we use the term “child” throughout, we recognize that the child in your care may be a teenager or young adult and that you may be caring for more than one child.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of nervousness, worry, or unease that is associated with an anticipated event or perceived threat. It occurs when we think we're in danger. The way our body and mind react to danger is to get us ready to fight, to flee, or to freeze. This way of responding was adaptive in early times when humans needed to be ready to respond to physical threats in the environment, like an approaching bear or lion. Unfortunately, the fight, flight, freeze response can't distinguish between real and perceived danger, therefore both scenarios produce the same feeling.

Fight, Flight or Freeze is our body's natural reaction to danger (perceived or real). Signals are sent from our amygdala (brain's alarm system) to prepare our body for action by fighting off an attacker; hiding/being still (freeze) or running away (flight) until the threat is over.

Anxiety can show itself in a variety of ways – in our thoughts (e.g., worrisome scenarios that come to mind), through physical sensations (e.g., headaches, muscle tension), and in our actions (e.g., procrastinating or avoiding things). The ways that your child might experience anxiety can vary, depending on their age and the severity of their symptoms.

A child who fears a presentation at school may exhibit any of the following:

- **Thoughts:** “What if I forget what to say?” “What if the whole class laughs at me?”
- **Physical symptoms:** can include headache, upset stomach, sleep difficulties, racing heart.
- **Behaviour:** school refusal, skipping class, purposely getting into trouble before presentation to be sent to the office, etc.



The level of anxiety that your child may experience can range from mild to severe, with many levels in between, and can change over time or with different circumstances. The following section can help in determining if the anxiety your child is showing is typical for their age and stage or if it might be a problem requiring support.

How can I tell if my child is struggling with anxiety?

Anxiety becomes a problem for your child when what they perceive as dangerous or scary isn't in fact, harmful. The following can indicate problems with anxiety:

- struggles with school attendance – separation issues in younger children or skipping class in older students
- excessive worries
- explosive anger/angry outbursts (at times, anger can mask anxiety)
- recurring physical symptoms without medical explanation (e.g. stomach aches)
- perfectionism or an inability to start or finish a task
- sleep difficulties (falling asleep, staying asleep or sleeping too much)
- social issues, like extreme shyness around peers

How can I help my child manage their anxiety?

- Model calm behaviour. Reflect on – and be intentional about – how you handle anxiety – both your child's and your own.
- Keep a predictable routine – especially around anxiety-provoking situations.
- Acknowledge how your child is feeling. You can acknowledge their feelings and encourage them to face their anxiety at the same time. For example, "I know it feels scary AND I believe you can do this"
- Avoidance is not the answer. It provides short-term relief but worsens anxious symptoms overall.
- Help your child face their fear by taking manageable baby steps towards the anxious situation. For example, going to school supported by caring adults is more effective than staying home.
- Switch to "coach" mode and motivate your child to keep trying. Praise their brave efforts, remind them of previous accomplishments, and support them as they embrace new challenges.
- Practice [calming strategies](#) with your child during a non-anxious time so they can build competency in using the skills when anxiety arises.
- Help your child challenge their anxious thoughts and replace them with more balanced thoughts. For example, you could ask "What would you say to a friend who was having this worry?" or "what would your friend say to you?"
- Help your child brainstorm possible solutions to a problem that is causing anxiety.

When should I seek support?

- If your child exhibits long-lasting anxiety (more than two weeks).
- If they display a persistent increase in the intensity of their anxiety.
- If your child frequently experiences anxious feelings and worried thoughts.
- If anxiety is impacting your child's functioning at home, school, or in the community.



How can I find professional support for my child?

At school – There are many people who can provide support at school. You can speak to your child’s classroom teacher or a school staff member with whom you feel comfortable. Ontario schools offer assessment and brief prevention and early intervention services from social work and psychology staff.

In the community – If more support is needed, school staff or your family doctor can connect your child with mental health services. If you do not have a family doctor/nurse practitioner, please visit <https://www.ontario.ca/page/find-family-doctor-or-nurse-practitioner> to get connected.

You can also contact:

- [Children’s Mental Health Ontario](#) – Access free mental health treatment in your area, including walk-in clinics (virtual and in-person,) ongoing counselling and therapy, and intensive and specialized treatment. No referrals necessary.
- [One Stop Talk](#) – Instantly connect with a therapist from anywhere in Ontario to create a plan and access additional support when needed.
- [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#) – Access a range of services in several Ontario communities. Easily access free services by walk-in or appointment.

Supporting a child experiencing a mental health problem can be challenging; consider reaching out for your own support. Contact [Parent’s for Children’s Mental Health](#) to connect with other parents and caregivers going through similar experiences.

Helpful resources

- [Anxiety Canada](#)

References

Anxiety 101: What You and Your Child Need to Know About Anxiety. (n.d.). Anxiety Canada. Retrieved October 17, 2024, from <https://www.anxietycanada.com/articles/anxiety-101-what-you-and-your-child-need-to-know-about-anxiety/>

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