

# Identifying and Managing Anxiety in Children

We all experience some degree of anxiety when faced with stressful or frightening situations. Children are no exception. Apprehension prior to a new experience, such as a move, or nervousness before an exam, are emotions that should be addressed but do not usually raise red flags. Some fears are a normal part of a child's development and should be no cause for serious concern.



But real, persistent anxiety can be debilitating and can lead to other conditions. By paying attention to some of the signs, you can learn to better understand when something is just a passing fear, and when a bout of anxiety signals a need for more serious attention.

## Common Childhood Fears

**Birth to 3 years:** Sharp noises, strange animals or people, very large objects, and separation from family.

**3 to 7 years:** Fantasy fears such as ghosts, monsters, and scary noises and being alone in the dark. Natural disasters such as thunderstorms, floods, and earthquakes. New experiences, including starting school.

**7 years and older:** More realistic fears such as car accidents, death, illness, school and social problems, war, and natural disasters.

## Tips to Help Your Child Relax

Try to remain calm yourself—fear and worry are usually manageable with a few simple strategies. Here are some tips to help you get going:

- Encourage your child to talk about their feelings while remaining positive, comforting, and nonjudgmental.
- Reassure your child that physical symptoms, such as stomachaches, are not due to a serious illness. (Do seek medical attention for any severe, persistent, or worsening physical symptoms.)
- Provide reassurance that you are there for support but allow your child quiet time when anxiety is high.
- Parents naturally want to inspire their children to succeed. But avoid undue pressure to perform in school, sports, or other activities, which can contribute to high levels of stress and sap the joy.

## Other Helpful Tips to Aid in Calming

- Follow a regular bedtime routine to encourage good sleeping habits. Warm milk or soothing music or sound effects can be calming.
- Avoid caffeinated foods or beverages such as cola, coffee, or chocolate.
- Encourage exercise, which is a great stress buster (but not too close to bedtime).

## Signs of Anxiety

Anxiety is a response of fear or worry which goes beyond what the situation calls for. When anxiety seems to be getting in the way of your child's enjoyment of life or healthy development, it's time to seek help.

You should seek medical advice if any of the following become persistent in your child, or seriously worsen:

- chronic worries about specific situations, people, noises, or objects
- withdrawal
- frequent crying or sadness
- unusual irritability or displays of anger
- difficulty sleeping or insomnia
- headaches, stomachaches, or chest pain
- shaking, dizziness, racing heart, and shallow breathing
- sweating and flushing
- ability to function in everyday life is becoming affected

### **Helping a Child with Anxiety**

**Speak with your child's doctor.** Describe to the doctor what you've noticed about your child's behavior that has caused you concern. Your doctor can perform an initial screening and determine appropriate next steps.

**Find a mental health counselor.** Look into finding a counselor or therapist for your child who is experienced with working with children. Visit the website of the American Psychological Association and search for qualified and accredited child therapists or ask your child's pediatrician for a referral.

**Learn about childhood anxiety.** Managing your child's anxiety may be time-limited or ongoing, depending on the severity. Ask your doctor or counselor for resources. Visit the Anxiety & Depression Association of America for more information on Anxiety in Children and Teens. Reach out to your organization's assistance program for support and resources.

**Be kind to yourself.** As a parent or caregiver of a child with anxiety, you may have feelings of worry and guilt. Find support for yourself by participating in a support group to share and find comfort in others with similar experiences. Find ways to take time out and care for yourself so that you can be at your best to support your child.

**Contact Caterpillar's Global Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** The EAP is a free, voluntary, and completely confidential service provided to employees and their eligible family members to help meet many challenges at home and work, including managing child anxiety. You can access the EAP 24/7 online at [CaterpillarEAP.com](https://www.caterpillar.com/eap) or by phone at **1-866-CAT(228)-0565**.

*Rosabel Perez, MSW, – Social Worker*  
© LifeWorks 2023