

Anxiety and depression in children: Get the facts



Many children have fears and worries, and may feel sad and hopeless from time to time. Strong fears may appear at different times during development. For example, toddlers are often very distressed about being away from their parents, even if they are safe and cared for. Although some fears and worries are typical in children, persistent or extreme forms of fear and sadness could be due to anxiety or depression.

Facts about anxiety and depression in children.

- Anxiety and depression affect many children
 - 7.1% of children aged 3-17 years have diagnosed anxiety.
 - 3.2% of children aged 3-17 years have diagnosed depression.

Anxiety

When children do not outgrow the fears and worries that are typical in young children, or when there are so many fears and worries that they interfere with school, home, or play activities, the child may be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Examples of different types of anxiety disorders include:

- **Separation anxiety** - Being very afraid when away from parents
- **Phobias** - Having extreme fear about a specific thing or situation, such as dogs, insects, or going to the doctor
- **Social Anxiety** - Being very afraid of school and other places where there are people
- **General Anxiety** - Being very worried about the future and about bad things happening
- **Panic Disorder** - Having repeated episodes of sudden, unexpected, intense fear that come with symptoms like heart pounding, having trouble breathing, or feeling dizzy, shaky, or sweaty

Anxiety may present as fear or worry, but can also make children irritable and angry. Anxiety symptoms can also include trouble sleeping, as well as physical symptoms like fatigue, headaches, or stomach aches. Some anxious children keep their worries to themselves and, thus, the symptoms can be missed.

Depression

Occasionally being sad or feeling hopeless is a part of every child's life. However, some children feel sad or uninterested in things that they used to enjoy, or feel helpless or hopeless in situations they are able to change. When children feel persistent sadness and hopelessness, they may be diagnosed with depression.

Examples of behaviours often seen in children with depression include:

- Feeling sad, hopeless, or irritable a lot of the time
- Not wanting to do, or enjoy doing fun things
- Showing changes in eating patterns – eating a lot more or a lot less than usual
- Showing changes in sleep patterns – sleeping a lot more or a lot less than normal
- Showing changes in energy – being tired and sluggish or tense and restless a lot of the time
- Having a hard time paying attention
- Feeling worthless, useless, or guilty
- Showing self-injury and self-destructive behaviour



Extreme depression can lead a child to think about suicide or plan for suicide. For youth ages 10-24 years, suicide is among the leading causes of death.

Some children may not talk about their helpless and hopeless thoughts, and may not appear sad. Depression might also cause a child to make trouble or act unmotivated, causing others not to notice that the child is depressed, or to incorrectly label the child as a trouble-maker or lazy.

Treatment for Anxiety and Depression

The first step to treatment is to talk with a healthcare provider, such as your child's primary care provider or a mental health specialist, about getting an evaluation. Some of the signs and symptoms of anxiety or depression in children could be caused by other conditions, such as trauma. A mental health professional can develop a therapy plan that works best for the child and family. Behaviour therapy includes child therapy, family therapy, or a combination of both. For very young children, involving parents in treatment is key; the school can also be included in the treatment plan. Consultation with a healthcare provider can help determine if medication should be part of the treatment.

Reference:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov

Adapted by Get into Neurodiversity for a global audience