

Anxiety in Children

Anxiety, like many emotions, is experienced by everyone. Anxiety is protective in nature and is a physiological, cognitive and behavioural response to threat and danger. Anxiety serves to prepare the person for responding to the danger such as preparing to fight the threat or flee to safety. When the danger is no longer present anxiety levels typically lower so that the person may engage with other activities and return to typical functioning.

For some children, anxiety is experienced in the absence of any real threat or danger however the anxiety felt is at the same level as if danger was present. This can be confusing for children as their brains and bodies are telling them that they are not safe. When children are anxious, in the absence of any danger, they will engage in a variety of safety seeking and soothing behaviours such as crying, running away, hiding, yelling, and physical aggression. Anger can often cover underlying anxiety. For other children, they may withdraw and appear passive and disengaged. Further, other children may mask their anxiety and dissociate from the experience as an act of self-preservation. A typical parenting response is to rescue the child, assure them that there is no danger and support them to distance themselves from the event or experience they are finding anxiety provoking.

The first step in best supporting a child experiencing significant anxiety is to better understand what they are feeling and the situations in which they experience these feelings. For some children they can easily articulate and communicate their feelings, other children may require support to do this. When we have a better understanding of the situations and experiences (the 'triggers') that are connected to the child's anxiety we can better determine how to support the child. This part of informally assessing anxiety is crucial as some children experience anxiety due to skill deficits or skill differences (e.g., autistic and ADHD kids) and will require different supports.

For children who are typically developing and who experience levels of anxiety that significantly impact their capacity to engage in school, social experiences and engage with the community they are likely to require additional support from a mental health clinician such as a psychologist. These supports are likely to involve the following:

- Building the child's emotional literacy skills,
- Building the child's understanding of physical sensations associated with feelings,
- Supporting the child to develop insight into their thoughts.
- Following this skill building, children are taught regulation skills that include thinking skills and external supports they can access when feeling overwhelmed.

The key aspect of improving a child's management of anxiety is, when the appropriate skills are developed, to then support them and their parents to face the things they feel fearful about. Experiencing the thing they fear provides direct evidence that it's not dangerous and this assists in changing the way the child thinks and feels about what they previously feared. Parents must play an active role in supporting the child's engagement with the child's fear.

A key aspect to treating anxiety is to ensure that avoidance of the fearful item/experience is minimised. This relief, via avoidance, is short lived as the child will likely face the same or other fears again and their history of avoidance will tell them that the only way they can feel safe is to avoid the thing they are anxious about at all costs. Over time this avoidance perpetuates anxiety and does little to improve the child's capacity to engage in life experiences.

Managing significant anxiety typically requires the support of a qualified mental health clinician. This support, when complemented with care and compassion need not be long term. Once the child and their parents have developed the skills to better navigate anxiety, they will be able to independently manage this without the need for ongoing psychological support.