

APPENDIX F. Information and recommendations for managing childhood anxiety

Managing anxiety in children

What is anxiety?

By definition “anxiety” refers to a vague and unpleasant emotional state. It is often accompanied by feelings such as dread, uneasiness, fear and distress. Anxiety by itself is not a dysfunctional emotion, in fact experiencing fear and anxiety is a normal part of growing up. At times children can become afraid of specific places, things or events such as school, spiders or going away on holidays. At other times children’s anxiety can be quite general and apply to a wide range of things. However sometimes anxiety can become overwhelming and debilitating for the child. At this point it is likely that the child has crossed from experiencing regular anxiety to clinical anxiety and a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder may be appropriate.

What are some of the symptoms of clinical anxiety in children?

The symptoms for childhood anxiety are by and large the same as those observed in anxiety in adults. These symptoms fall into 2 categories; physical and psychological symptoms. The physical symptoms are caused by a neural pathway in the body called the sympathetic nervous system. This system prepares the body to fight flight (run) or freeze when the brain perceives a threat. The brain does this by releasing stress hormones such as adrenaline through our body which activates our sympathetic nervous system. When activated the sympathetic nervous system increases our heart rate, breathing and moves blood to the parts of our body that need it most, such as our muscles. This is very useful when we are presented with an actual threat, such as an oncoming car, but can be quite debilitating when it is overactive, as is the case in clinical anxiety.

Physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- sweating
- shortness of breath
- rapid heartbeat
- tight chest
- dizziness
- dry mouth
- hot and cold flushes
- diarrhoea
- nausea
- stomach cramps
- shaking

The psychological symptoms of anxiety include:

- poor concentration
- being on edge or irritable
- feeling cranky
- excessive crying
- tantrums
- freezing
- clinging to parents
- resistance to change
- avoiding social situations
- fear that you are going mad or are bad
- fear that that you are really sick or going die

Parents of children with anxiety

Here are some helpful tips for managing children with anxiety:

1. Provide a safe, secure, familiar and dependable home.
2. Spend calm, relaxed time with your child. Activities might include reading together, playing at the beach together, going on a quiet picnic in the bush.
3. When appropriate encourage your child to tell you what they are worried about.
4. Try not to criticise the things that your child tells you are worrying them or to brush them off lightly. This will only inhibit them from telling you what is troubling them later.
5. Use encouragement and affection to build your child's self-worth. Involving your child in situations where they will succeed is a great way to foster self-worth. A strong sense of self-worth in your child will do wonders for combating anxiety.
6. Use positive reinforcement for shaping your child's behaviour rather than punishment (when practical).
7. When it is appropriate allow your child to make choices such as "Which book would you like to borrow from the library?" or "We are going to play a game. Do you want to play Snakes & Ladders or Pictionary?" This will help your child combat the feeling that everything is out of control.
8. Become aware of the situations that make your child anxious.
9. Be careful which TV programs and DVDs you allow your child to watch. The evening news can add fuel to the fire for a child who worries about everything.
10. Train yourself in the signs of anxiety in your child. How do you know that your child is anxious? When appropriate, point these out to your child. "Billy you're starting to breathe quickly there – Can you tell me what you are worried about?"
11. Discourage avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations and reward your child when they attempt to do the things that make them anxious.
12. Do you think that your child seeks a lot of reassurance from you? If so try to eliminate some of this. Instead of soothing the child ask what the problem is and try and problem solve together.
13. Keep your child informed of necessary changes such as moving house or getting a new job.
14. Make sure your child stays active to help stay relaxed.
15. Identify activities that help calm your child and encourage them to do that when they are worked up e.g. have a shower or listening to soothing music.
16. Encourage your child to take deep, slow breaths when they are panicking. Get them to repeat the word "Calm" each time that they exhale.
17. Teach your child problem solving skills. This can often be done when reading a book or watching a TV program by asking key questions such as; "What is the problem here?" "What do you think they should do about it?" "What do you think will happen if they do that?" and "What would you do?"
18. If possible, and depending on your child's age, help them to see the link between what we think and what we feel and what we do.

(Adapted from the DHCS ACT Tip sheet: Managing anxiety in children)

Teachers of children with anxiety

Here are some helpful tips for managing children with anxiety:

1. Provide as much support as you can but without too much fuss, e.g. "I can see that you are worried about this but just do the best that you can" – then walk away.
2. Reward non-anxious behaviour and ignore anxious behaviour. For example reward the child who answers a question class for the first time but ignore the child when they get teary because you have to switch classrooms.
3. Try to avoid giving too much reassurance. If the child asks if what they are doing is right say "What have you done so far?" rather than just saying yes.
4. Encourage them to face their fears by taking small steps. For instance, if the child is afraid to answer questions in class build them up to doing it by first getting them to answer questions in pairs, then in front of a small group and finally in front of the whole class. Be sure to reward each step.
5. Provide opportunities to develop independence such as running a message for you.
6. Ask them an occasional easy question in class to develop confidence but don't push them if they actually don't know the answer.
7. Let them experience the natural consequences of their fears. Avoidance is often what maintains our fears.
8. Understand that their anxious behaviour is not a deliberate attempt to be naughty.
9. Talk with the child's parents regularly to develop and refine your strategies.
10. Encourage your child to seek out the school counsellor or welfare officer when appropriate. Help them to see that this is an okay thing to do.

(Adapted from the MAURU website information for referrers)

References

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