



# Anxiety in Children and Teens

Difficulty managing anxiety is one of the most common mental health issues that affects children and teens. Around 1 in 10 struggle with anxiety enough that they perform below their best, have fewer friends, and miss out on activities that other children enjoy like parties or sleepovers. Parents of children who struggle managing anxiety often report that they must change the way the family works day to day so that their child does not get upset. In the long term, these children are more likely to have mental health problems throughout their life and they may have difficulty making the transition to employment and independent living.

There are a number of different types of anxiety that children and teens experience. Often they will experience more than one type.

## **SOCIAL ANXIETY**

Social anxiety is fear and worry in situations where you need to interact with other people or be the focus of attention. Children who experience high levels of social anxiety are more commonly described as extremely shy, and their main concern is that other people will think badly of them. They fear that they will do something or act in a way that will be embarrassing.

Children with social anxiety avoid situations such as:

- speaking in front of the class (class discussions, presentations, reading aloud),
- speaking to adults,
- meeting new people,
- making new friends or maintaining friendships,
- joining teams or clubs,
- going to parties, and/or
- asking for help.

Social anxiety often goes unnoticed because the child or teen is typically quiet and obedient in school and may not voice their fears.

Of course, shyness on its own is not a problem (some children are slow to warm up to other people but can and do warm up after a period of time). It is only problematic when it interferes with their enjoyment in life and is persistent across time and circumstances. Those with social anxiety usually experience distress in social situations, and often their daily activities are disrupted due to avoidance. They may also experience physical symptoms such as nausea, stomach aches, blushing or trembling.

## **GENERALISED ANXIETY**

Generalised anxiety is a tendency to worry about many areas of life. Children with high levels of generalised anxiety are often described as “worriers” or “worrywarts”. They worry excessively about:

- schoolwork (getting things right, not making mistakes, being on time),
- family relationships and finances,
- friendships,
- health and safety,
- potential dangers and
- new situations.

These children are often overlooked because they can be very conscientious in the classroom and it is sometimes difficult to know that they are constantly worrying. They often ‘hold it all in’ until they get home.

Some of the signs of consistent worry are daydreaming, stomach aches, headaches, tiredness and inattention. They often ask lots of questions over and over, particularly in new situations, such as “What is going to happen?” or “What if...?” and they may struggle to get to sleep at night as they are worrying about the next day.

## SEPARATION ANXIETY

Separation anxiety is a tendency to worry that something bad will happen that will keep a family apart. A child may worry that there will be a car accident, that they will get lost or that someone will kidnap them. These worries makes it difficult for a child to be away from their parents or home.

Separation and stranger anxiety are common in toddlers but these fears typically decrease throughout early childhood. When this anxiety persists into the school years it can be very draining on parents who may be unable to go out alone and the children struggle to participate in activities such as camps, excursions and parties where parents are unable to attend. At its worst everyday outings to places such as supermarkets and attending school can become difficult.

## SPECIFIC PHOBIAS

Specific phobias are intense fears of particular things or situations. These fears are so strong that a child will worry about the situation occurring ahead of time, will avoid the situation if at all possible and will become terrified if it occurs unexpectedly.

Some common specific phobias in children and teens include:

- the dark or storms,
- dogs, sharks or other animals,
- spiders, cockroaches or other insects,
- costumed characters,
- doctors or dentists,
- vomiting or choking, and,
- blood and injections.

## PANIC ATTACKS AND AGORAPHOBIA

Panic attacks are a sudden rush of fear that comes together with a number of physical feelings such as a racing heart, breathlessness, tightness in the throat or chest, sweating, light-headedness, and tingling.

Panic attacks can occur when in a particular feared situation like before giving a speech, when going into a new situation or when approaching a dog. For some children and teens, however, they have a fear of the panic attack itself (e.g., I might be dying, something is terribly wrong with me) rather than of the situation (e.g., people laughing, dog biting, getting lost).

To avoid ever feeling panic, these children and teens may become anxious about using public transport, being in large open spaces, being in closed in spaces, being in a crowd or even being away from home alone.

## WHEN TO SEEK HELP?

Anxiety that is severe can impact on a child's health and happiness. Some anxious children will grow out of their fears. Other children, unless they receive treatment, will continue to experience interference from their anxiety and subsequent problems such as depression and substance abuse throughout their lives.

Knowing when to seek help can be difficult for parents. Psychologists consider anxiety a problem if a child or teen's worries and anxiety:

- are significantly interfering with the child's or family's daily functioning and routine,
- are not age-appropriate, and
- persist across time (roughly longer than 6 months).

Most children have fears or worries of some form. To work out whether your child's anxiety is normal, ask yourself the following question:

- *Is anxiety stopping them from doing things they want to do or need to do?* The difficulties might be with friends, school or family life.
- *Do most other children the same age also have the same fear or worry?* For example some social anxiety when starting high school is common, but persistent separation anxiety after age 8 is uncommon.
- *How severe is my child's reaction?* If a child is inconsolable or extremely distressed and hard to settle, this can indicate that the anxiety is too strong to manage alone.

## ABOUT THE COOL KIDS PROGRAM

Forcing a child to do the things they find frightening and dismissing persistent worries rarely leads to a reduction in anxiety. Instead, parents should contact their GP or another mental health care professional for further information on treatment options.

There are a number of evidence-based programs and services that can effectively help reduce children's anxiety, such as the Cool Kids Program.

Cool Kids is a 10-session program for children and teens. It uses a cognitive behavioural approach which means that it focuses on teaching skills to manage anxiety. Sessions involve a child/teen and their parent/caregiver(s).

If your child is showing symptoms of anxiety, and you would like to learn more about the Cool Kids Program, click on this [link](#)

You can search for an accredited Cool Kids provider in your local area at this [link](#).

### FIND OUT MORE

Emotional Health Clinic, Lifespan Health and Wellbeing Research Centre

Macquarie University NSW 2109 Australia

T: +61 (2) 9850 8711

[ehc.admin@mq.edu.au](mailto:ehc.admin@mq.edu.au)

[mq.edu.au/ceh-clinic](http://mq.edu.au/ceh-clinic)



**MACQUARIE**  
University