

Social anxiety in children

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANXIETY IN CHILDREN?

Social anxiety is fear and worry in situations where the child has to interact with other people or be the focus of attention. Children who experience higher levels of social anxiety are more commonly described as shy, and the central problem is a fear that other people will think badly of them. They fear that they will do something or act in a way that will be embarrassing. The child may experience physical symptoms such as nausea, stomachaches, blushing, or trembling. Children with social phobia may avoid many situations that require interaction with other people, including meeting new people, talking on the telephone, joining teams or clubs, answering questions in class, or wearing the “wrong” clothes.

Social anxiety often goes unnoticed because the child is typically quiet and obedient in preschool/school and may not voice his or her fears. Of course, shyness in itself is not a problem (if everyone was an extrovert the world would be a much less interesting and enjoyable place), it is only problematic when it interferes with the child’s enjoyment in life. Many shy children develop satisfying and long-term friendships and have outstanding careers and achievements. However, if the shyness and social anxiety prevent the child from participating in everyday activities (such as classroom discussions), enjoyable events (such as parties) or from making lasting friendships then it is worth seeking help.

HOW COMMON IS SOCIAL ANXIETY?

Between 1 and 9% of children and adolescents will develop Social Anxiety and this is diagnosed when the child’s social anxiety has persisted for more than 6 months and has a significant impact on the child’s life (Schniering, Hudson & Rapee, 2000).

WHAT CAN I DO IF MY CHILD HAS SOCIAL ANXIETY

A number of general steps to reduce your child’s anxiety are explained on the ‘Generalised Anxiety in Kids’ Fact Sheet. Here are some specific examples for dealing with social anxiety.

STEPLADDERS FOR SOCIAL ANXIETY

Here is an example of a stepladder for a 4 year old child who is fearful of meeting and talking to new people.

Each stepladder needs to be set up so that it matches the child’s level of fear. The steps in the stepladder below may be too slow/easy or too fast/hard for some children. It will all depend on your child’s anxiety. For the first few times the child practices these stepladders, it is a good idea to choose children/adults that you know will react kindly to your child. Once your child is more confident, they can practice saying hello or approaching a child that is unfamiliar (and hence you won’t know how the child/person will react). Sometimes peers do react in a less than ideal way or may reject your child. One of the lessons your child can learn from these step ladders is that she can cope even if someone doesn’t want to play with her.

ENCOURAGE AND REWARD YOUR CHILD TO:

1. Say “hello” to one of your friends that she has met a few times.
2. Say “hello” to a child she doesn’t know at the park
3. Say “hello” to the person at the supermarket checkout.
4. Say “hello” to an adult you have just met.
5. Say “hello” to an unfamiliar child at preschool
6. Say “hello, Can I play with you?” to a child she doesn’t know at the park.
7. Talk to a child she doesn’t know that well at preschool about what they did on the weekend.
8. Visit a new group/class and say “Hello” and “Goodbye” to one of the children in the class



Photo credit: Chris Stacey

9. Visit the new group/class and talk with one of the children in the class.
10. Visit the new group/class and talk with two of the children in the class.

COPING SKILLS FOR THE STEPLADDERS

Toddlers (1-3 years): Repeat a phrase to the child “I can do it”

Younger children (3-6 years): Help your child to come up with a phrase that they could say to themselves when they are in the situation such as “I can be brave”, “No-one will laugh”, “I will be ok.”

Older children (7+ years): You can help your child learn more quickly during the stepladders by helping them to think more realistically in the situation. Encourage your child to ask him/herself: “What happened last time when I asked a question in class?”, “How likely is that I will mess up my words?”, or “What did I think of my friend when he gave the wrong answer?”

OTHER HELPFUL TIPS FOR SOCIAL ANXIETY

- Prepare beforehand. Act out the steps at home before trying it in the real world.
- Do not force the child to talk or approach the situation in front of other people. For example, avoid saying in front of others “Come on. Say hello to Jane. Don’t be shy.” By doing the preparation beforehand, you can avoid having to increase the child’s embarrassment in the situation. A gentle, quiet reminder may be ok but don’t push it.
- If the child completes the step, acknowledge their achievement quietly if other people are close by and then make a big deal of it when you are with them alone.
- If the child is unable to complete the step, try again another day with more preparation (or perhaps try an easier step). Do not punish or scold your child for not completing the step.
- It can be useful to tell your child’s pre-school, kindergarten or school and inform them of your approach to your child’s social fears. They can help you to achieve the steps on the stepladder. This way other people in your child’s environment can give a consistent message. This will prevent others in your child’s environment from either i) pushing/forcing your child too quickly to face situations or ii) encouraging the child’s avoidance by not asking your child questions in class.
- Avoiding social situations will exacerbate the problem.

Gently encourage your child to participate in social situations and start new activities.

- No matter how frustrated you feel, avoid criticising your child or making subtle negative remarks about his/her difficulty in social situations.

DID YOU KNOW?

Embarrassment first develops at around 2-3 years of age.



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