

Anxiety in Children

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Part of normal development in children is to experience situations or circumstances that give rise to anxiety, fearfulness, or worrying. In infancy, at about seven to eight months of age, babies may show a reaction to strangers—crying, clinging to their mother, or just the fading of a happy smile into a quiet, watchful gaze.

It's usually recommended that during this period parents avoid leaving a child with a new babysitter. It's also wise to prepare other family members—for example, grandparents—for the possibility that the baby may protest when held by anyone but the parents.

Preschoolers often develop a fear of the dark, of animals, or of imaginary situations—for example, the tiger under the bed. Handling these fears by acknowledging them, not belittling them, and by showing the child how to manage them results in a calm, confident child. As one of my four-year-old patients told me quite unashamedly and confidently, "I'm afraid of the dark, but my mommy comes with me and turns on the light."

School-aged children may develop fears for their own health and safety. At this age, lessons in school may have an inordinate impact. An eight-year-old girl in my practice, after a talk in class about poisons and the skull and crossbones symbol on labels of poisonous chemicals, became very anxious and, for a week or two, checked the labels of all the jars and bottles in her home, asking, "Is this poisonous?" After a lesson at school about drugs and alcohol, another child, a fifth grader, became very upset whenever her parents had wine with dinner.

Many events that are traumatic for all of us can be particularly so for children. After the 1989 earthquake in the Bay Area, it was very common for children to want to sleep with or near their parents for one or two weeks. Many parents put a mattress or futon on the floor next to their bed without any question.

Events in the news can also be a source of worry to children. A ten-year-old boy suddenly became afraid of sleeping alone in his own room. After some detective work, the father realized his son had read a newspaper article about a burglary in their neighborhood. After explaining how their house was secure, the father suggested the family dog might sleep in the boy's room until he felt more comfortable, and the problem was solved.

Anxiety can become a disabling illness in children. It may present as physical symptoms—often headache or abdominal pain—or with emotional symptoms such as panic attacks, severe school phobia, or inordinate fears about separation from parents or about the parents' health. Both physical and emotional symptoms may take time to sort out; and for both, medication and consultation with a child psychiatrist may be required.

Effective handling of the anxiety related to normal development in children may prevent progression to more severe symptoms. The role of the parent is to remain calm, in control, and reassuring and to offer clear explanations to children about the world we live in. And when parents need the same reassurance, they should share their worry and anxiety with their child's pediatrician.