



Are My Child's Worries Normal?

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Sometimes it's difficult for parents to relate to what their kids are worrying about, especially while they are also dealing with adult pressures. Children who feel stress often manifest behaviors that interfere with social interactions and with academic performance.

How do I tell if my child is experiencing anxiety or just the typical fears and worries of childhood?

Everyone experiences some level of fear and worry. This is not a bad thing. As a matter of fact, these feelings actually signal us to change our behavior in potentially threatening situations.

For instance, most of us worry if it suddenly begins to thunder and lightning while we are swimming. Our fear signals us to get out of the pool! Similarly, our heart may beat faster when we find ourselves alone in a parking garage at night! These are examples of healthy fears that aid us in protecting ourselves.

Children often worry about things they can't control or don't understand such as separation from a parent, natural disasters, fear of the dark, and getting lost. Still others struggle with extreme shyness in social settings such as school or the playground. And, some children worry about everything.

Therefore, the question is not, "Are my child's fears normal?" All fears and worries are normal. The more appropriate question is, "Are my child's worries interfering with her ability to function successfully in her world?"

To be successful in school, your child must be able to focus, learn new ideas, follow through with assignments, and be socially engaged. Imagine if your child was fixated on a fire breaking out and consequently constantly distracted by the thoughts. Or she is so worried about making a mistake on her homework that she can't even get started? How can your child possibly perform up to her potential when these thoughts intrude and interfere with her learning all day long?

Children who are socially anxious tend to be shy and unassertive and have trouble making and keeping friends. It is like torture for them to join a game on the playground or take the risk of appearing stupid in front of their peers. These feelings may trigger avoidance of social activities altogether. So you can imagine how stressful it is for a

socially anxious child to navigate the complex interactions at school and extra curricular activities.

Your child's anxiety is likely to impact your entire family. For example, if your child has trouble sleeping, you also suffer the consequences of sleep deprivation. Your child's need for constant reassurance whenever confronted with a new situation is fatiguing. And you may be tempted to cope by asking the whole family to tip-toe around one child's fears and worries.

A helpful way to think about childhood anxiety is that it amplifies typical concerns and fears. The apprehensions are more intense, more frequent, and limiting than developmentally appropriate fears.

How can I help?

By creating a calm environment at home, you can lessen the likelihood anxiety will develop in the first place. You can learn to teach your child basic stress management strategies before worries and fears develop into full blown anxiety. To follow are a few home remedies; try those that feel comfortable to you.

Make sure your child is not overcommitted.

Children need down time! They must have time to relax and just play. Prioritize your child's activities and make their schedule realistic.

Be proactive against stress.

Develop a plan to cope with your child's potentially stressful situations. Sit down together to formulate and rehearse a plan. For example, before going to a birthday party of a new friend, you can rehearse "joining in" steps: 1. Find the birthday child 2. Wish her a "Happy Birthday" 3. Sit next to someone with a friendly face.

Take baby steps.

Help your child break down what needs to be accomplished into small, manageable steps. This technique is especially helpful with homework. Make sure you plan with your child and not for your child. Empower her by guiding her to solve problems on her own.

Set up special time each day with your child.

Spend 15 minutes a day just to talk and follow your child's lead. If she doesn't feel like talking and would rather play cards, then do what she wants to do. Kids often like to bond before bedtime.

Make sure your child eats and sleeps well.

Feed your child healthy, nutritious meals and snacks. Stress depletes our bodies of essential nutrients. Be sure your child has predictable bedtimes and she's getting enough sleep for her age.

Get physical!

Any team or individual sport--running, walking, biking, karate--helps reduce body tension associated with stress.

TV/Computer--stress reliever or stress producer?

Make certain your child's television and computer habits are stress relieving not stress producing. Just because your child wants it does not mean that your child needs it!

Manage your own stress well.

If you can, cut back your hours at work to be more available to your child. Learn ways to mitigate your stress at the office and to diffuse it once you come home.

Try stress buster exercises.

Teach your child deep breathing or help her use progressive relaxation (alternately tensing and relaxing all major muscle groups). Another technique is to ask your child to close her eyes and imagine a pleasant trip or a favorite memory. This technique is called visualization or guided daydreaming and is an easy way to reduce stress. Your child might enjoy a nightly massage to relax her and help her sleep, or a warm bath.

Adopt as many of these exercises as you can and be consistent. Remember it takes time and practice for real change to take place. Keep your expectations realistic and convey a positive attitude even if you feel frustrated. Be pro-active in setting up a peaceful home setting. If, after you've practiced these strategies for several months, your child continues to struggle with anxiety, then explore group or individual therapy for your child. A professional who specializes in working with anxious children can help you and your child develop a tool box of coping skills for managing anxiety.