

## When Anxiety is Healthy and Unhealthy

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time—it can even help us perform better, try harder. Our bodies respond to a danger or threat with an energizing or activating response. But that is normal anxiety. One in ten children suffer from an anxiety disorder. Over a lifetime, one in four people suffer from anxiety disorders. Anxiety is the same emotional response as fear, and symptoms can include headaches, stomach discomfort, chest pain, perspiration, muscle tension, restlessness.

When children experience serious persistent anxiety it may cause worry, confusion, memory problems, restlessness, and misunderstanding of the meaning of situations. If the anxiety is severe children may experience separation anxiety, uncontrollable fears, panic attacks, extreme shyness. These kids often do poorly in school and come to avoid it. Kids who suffer from anxiety disorders benefit from counseling; medication is generally considered a treatment of last resort. These supports usually come from outside the school.

All kids experience anxiety though, and research shows there are ways to help kids learn to control their fear. There are programs that teach kids how to recognize the signs of anxiety, developing adaptive ways of thinking, and using relaxation techniques (counting to 10, deep breathing). One of the most successful preventive programs is *Friends*, a program originating in Australia and currently available to all schools in British Columbia.

To make sure ordinary anxiety does not escalate it is important to listen to a child's fears and concerns (even if they don't seem rational), to be patient, to plan for transitions (like going to school or to bed), to remain calm (and provide a role model for dealing with anxiety), and to be reassuring. Emotional and social stability can enhance academic performance and so teaching children to deal with anxiety is a skill that helps with school but will last a lifetime.

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