Warning Signs of Anxiety in Children in Elementary School

Kids tend to worry about a lot of things. They may worry about sleeping alone, the dark, loud noises, leaving their parents and going to school; or things at school, such as big tests or a report, starting a new school, whether other kids will like them, new teachers and getting lot of homework.

However, these worries usually don’t last long or cause big problems in the child’s life. However, anxiety and/or worries become a problem when they are long lasting (duration), and/or they occur often and are difficult to deal with.

What are the warning signs of anxiety and when does anxiety become a problem?

1. **Warning Signs of Anxiety: What does your child do?**

   Children may cry and cling to parents; refuse to talk to or interact with peers or adults; complain when they are the center of attention; avoid completing their school work for fear of making mistakes; or avoid/refuse to go to school.

2. **Warning Signs of Anxiety: What does your child say?**

   Children may say they expect they will be made fun of or teased for what they do or say; worry about being perfect; expect that they won’t do a good job with their school work or while playing a sport; worry about disappointing others; report not feeling good about their abilities.

3. **Warning Signs of Anxiety: What do they say they are feeling?**

   Children may complain that they feel sick, have stomachaches, headaches, have trouble catching their breath, they may wiggle, be jittery, shaky, high strung, tense and unable to relax, report that they feel dizzy, have a lump in their throat, are sweating, or feel like they are going to throw up.

*These four questions are often useful for helping determine whether anxiety has made things difficult for your child. If so, your child may need support from a therapist or mental health provider.*

1) Does your child worry or ask for reassurance almost every day?
2) Does your child consistently avoid certain age-appropriate situations or activities, or avoid doing them without a parent?
3) Does your child frequently have stomachaches, headaches, or episodes of hyperventilation?
4) Does your child have daily repetitive rituals?
Warning Signs of Anxiety in Teens and Tweens

Teens and tweens tend to worry about a lot of things. They may worry about their friends, their social status, their grades, their future, and world events. However, these worries usually don’t last long or cause big problems. Anxiety can become a problem when it is long lasting (duration), and/or occurs often and disrupt routines or goals.

What are the warning signs of anxiety and when does anxiety become a problem?

1. Warning Signs of Anxiety: What does your teen do?

   Anxiety may be more obvious in younger children who may cry and cling to parents. With adolescents, anxiety may present itself in declining opportunities to talk to or interact with peers or adults. They may complain when they are the center of attention; avoid completing their school work for fear of making mistakes; or avoid/refuse to attempt activities in which they are not sure of their success.

2. Warning Signs of Anxiety: What does your teen say?

   It can be difficult to read between the few words of a teenager to determine if anxiety is at the root of their stress or avoidance. They may hint that they worry about what others think of them, or not see the point in doing an assignment if they can’t complete it perfectly. They often worry about disappointing their parents, and they can become distressed in imagining huge implications on their entire future life from one pop quiz.

3. Warning Signs of Anxiety: What do they say they are feeling?

   Even older kids may complain that they feel sick, have stomachaches or headaches. They may have changes in their sleep or appetite. They may oversaturate themselves with visual input (binging on Netflix while texting and checking Snapchat), or other sensory input (loud music while playing video games).

   These four questions are often useful for helping determine whether anxiety has made things difficult for your teen. If so, your teen may need support from a therapist or mental health provider.

1) Does your child worry or ask for reassurance almost every day?
2) Does your child consistently avoid certain age-appropriate situations or activities?
3) Does your child frequently have stomachaches, headaches, or episodes of hyperventilation?
4) Does your child have daily repetitive rituals?
How can I help my child handle stress?

Stress is the way our bodies and minds react to a particular challenge or situation. By recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress, you can help your child learn to manage his or her responses in a healthier way.

Plenty of scenarios can cause stress — good or bad — in a child’s life. A student may feel anxious about giving a class presentation, but that “good” stress can be used to inspire him or her to focus and prepare for the challenge.

An example of “bad” stress is when a child feels so overwhelmed with a problem at home or at school that it interferes with his or her ability to function normally. In these situations, the body activates a “fight-or-flight” response, resulting in heightened focus, strength and alertness. Once the child learns how to recognize a stressful situation, he or she can begin to make good decisions when managing stress.

Parents can help their children learn to be more resilient and to manage the stress that accompanies new challenges by allowing them to feel safe to express their emotions, work on problem-solving skills and practice relaxation techniques. Proper rest, good nutrition and maintenance of daily routines can help boost coping skills.

“A moderate level of stress is normal and helping a child manage and overcome stressful situations will enhance their ability to cope with stress in the future,” says Blanca Orellana, PhD, clinical psychologist, UCLA Nathanson Family Resilience Center and UCLA Family STAR Clinic. “The time to seek professional help is when any change in behavior persists over a period of time, causes serious anxiety, or causes significant physical or social problems.”

When to seek help

“Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is often used to help children learn stress management skills and to teach them how to better manage their time and find healthier ways to cope,” says Dr. Orellana. “In extreme cases, anti-anxiety medication may be recommended.”

All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional. Subscribe to Health Tips for Parents at uclahealth.org/enews.
How can I help my child handle stress?

Stress is the way our bodies and minds react to a particular challenge or situation. By recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress, you can help your child learn to manage his or her responses in a healthier way.

**Good stress** is a normal part of healthy development. A student may feel anxious about giving a class presentation, but that “good” stress can be used to inspire him or her to focus and prepare for the challenge.

**Bad stress** is when a child feels so overwhelmed with a problem at home or at school that it interferes with his or her ability to function normally. In these situations, the body activates a “fight-or-flight” response, resulting in heightened focus, strength and alertness.

**Signs of stress**
- Irritability and moodiness
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Muscle tension
- Rapid heartbeat and breathing
- Difficulty separating from caregivers
- Frequent headaches and stomach pains
- Sadness and withdrawal
- Sleep problems
- School problems
- Changes in eating patterns

**Parents can help**
A moderate level of stress is normal, and learning how to manage and overcome stressful situations will enhance your children’s ability to cope with stress in the future. Help them learn to be more resilient and to manage the stress that accompanies new challenges by allowing them to feel safe to express their emotions, work on problem-solving skills and practice relaxation techniques. Proper rest, good nutrition and daily routines can help boost coping skills.

20% of children suffer from extreme stress, but only 8% of parents think their kids are stressed.

When to seek professional help
If any change in behavior persists over a period of time, causes serious anxiety, or significant physical or social problems, it’s time to seek professional help.
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is often used to help children learn stress-management skills and to teach them how to better manage their time and find healthier ways to cope.

For more health tips, visit [uclahealth.org/mattel](http://uclahealth.org/mattel).
How can I help my child handle anxiety?

Anxiety is a natural human emotion and a normal reaction to life’s stresses. However, when the worry and fear associated with anxiety interfere with a child’s usual activities, he or she may have an anxiety disorder.

“All children and adolescents experience some anxiety around different aspects of their lives,” says R. Lindsey Bergman, PhD, associate clinical professor, Health Sciences at the UCLA Child Anxiety Resilience Education and Support (CARES) Center, “and the level of anxiety tends to vary according to their age.”

These “normal” types of anxieties and fears – which may sometimes be more frequent – usually do not tend to interfere with daily life. Anxiety becomes a problem (disorder) when it lasts for a long time each time, and is so intense that it interferes with a child’s ability to function socially, academically, physically and emotionally.

A child who has an anxiety disorder will likely show a fairly stable pattern of changes in mood (irritable or unhappy), cognition (difficulty concentrating or being easily distracted), behavior (avoidance of feared situations, withdrawal or trouble relaxing) and/or physical changes (difficulty sleeping, tense muscles, multiple physical complaints, headaches or stomach aches).

Biological, familial and environmental factors can contribute to anxiety disorders which are typically treated by either CBT and/or medication. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a structured, goal-focused, and time-limited intervention that involves exposing the child to their fear in a graded, step-by-step manner while teaching the child how to cope with their fear and distress. CBT is delivered alone or in combination with medication and/or mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is the practice of focusing awareness on the present situation without judgement and it can help with tolerating feelings of anxiety and distress. The medications shown in research studies to be most effective for both adult and child anxiety are Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs).

Tips to help an anxious child:

■ Gently encourage your child to do things he/she is anxious about instead of avoiding it
■ Praise and support your child’s efforts for attempting to approach a feared situation
■ Try to help your child manage anxiety
■ Give your child opportunities to observe you handling your own stressful or anxious difficulties in positive and healthy ways
■ Teach your child resilience to cope with, adapt to and overcome challenges

UCLA CARES Center

“It is important for parents to understand when ‘normal’ types of anxiety may start becoming a challenge for children and to seek the right resources. UCLA’s CARES Center offers online resources and programs to help families build resilience and overcome the challenges related to childhood stress and anxiety,” says Dr. Bergman.

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A child with an anxiety disorder will likely show:

**Changes in mood**
- Irritable or unhappy

**Cognitive issues**
- Difficulty concentrating or being easily distracted

**Behavioral changes**
- Avoidance of feared situations, withdrawal or trouble relaxing

**Physical changes**
- Difficulty sleeping, tense muscles, multiple physical complaints, headaches or stomach aches

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HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS
For Children, Teens & the Whole Family

The people in your family (big and small) require different amounts of sleep:
- Toddlers (0-3 years) need about 12-14 hours of sleep in a 24-hour period.
- Preschoolers (3-5 years) need about 11-13 hours of sleep each night.
- School-age children (5-11 years) need about 10-11 hours of sleep each night.
- Adolescents (12-18 years) need about 9 ½ hours of sleep each night.

Maintain a regular sleep schedule. Wake-up and go-to-sleep at approximately the same time each day, including weekends and holidays.

Create consistent, relaxing bedtime routines that help children "wind down" and prepare for a good night's sleep. Some ideas include:

- A warm bath before bed
- Turning down the lights in child's bedroom
- Singing songs or lullabies
- Reading a calming story
- Listening to quiet music or stories on tape
- Talking about the day
- Faith-based practices

For families with parental military deployment, consider audio recording favorite stories or songs that can be played as part of the bedtime ritual while parent is away.

Make child's bedroom conducive to sleep- dark, cool and quiet.
Keep TV and computers out of the bedroom.

Napping should be developmentally appropriate.
- Naps should not occur too close to bedtime, avoid naps after 3 pm.
- Children generally do not require naps after the age of five or six.
- For older children, teens and adults, napping during the day should be avoided.

It's okay to let teens sleep in on the weekend, but no more than 2 or 3 hours later than their usual weekday wake-up time.

Spend time outside each day to help strengthen the body's internal clock.

Regular exercise during the day can help children, teens and parents sleep better.

Keep children away from caffeine. Keep in mind hidden sources of caffeine: chocolate, candy, soda, energy drinks, energy bars, coffee drinks and desserts.

Avoid arguments just before bedtime.