

Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Maggie Dent

Getting a grip on worry-warts

As parents we often grapple with our own worries but one of the most common questions I get asked by mums and dads is 'what do I do when my child seems overly worried or anxious?'

Early anxiety is developmentally normal – in fact, being fearful or anxious is an essential human survival response. However, as parents we need to know how to soothe our children to help them get a handle on their anxiety. Otherwise it may interfere with their wellbeing.

In fact, anxiety is the most significant mental health issue in childhood and yet it frequently goes undetected, untreated and is frequently misdiagnosed as one of the attention disorders.

Anxiety can begin as early as age two but we see a significant rise when children enter the school system. Unless it's addressed many will go on to suffer their whole lives.

Why kids worry

We must remember that children under 6 or 7 see the world through children's eyes. This often means they find plenty to fear as the parts of their brain that rule rational thinking are not fully developed.

Research shows that the number one thing that children fear is feeling separated or unloved by their parents.

This means going to childcare or school, going to sleep, seeing mum or dad walk

out the door, sharing mum or dad with a new baby, or not feeling connected to their parents can be huge triggers for anxiety. While separation anxiety is normal, it's important for parents of sensitive children to really be on the lookout for when it becomes excessive.

Symptoms of separation anxiety disorder include:

- 1 Worrying about bad things happening to loved ones and being separated as a result
 - 2 Persistent reluctance to go to preschool/school, to be alone, to be without adults or loved ones (e.g. at home or when going to sleep)
 - 3 Repeated nightmares with themes of separation
 - 4 Physical complaints/symptoms when separated or anticipating separation
 - 5 Obvious distress.
- Angry outbursts
 - Oppositional and refusal behaviours
 - Temper tantrums
 - Aggression
 - Attention seeking behaviours
 - Hyperactivity and difficulty sitting still
 - Attention and concentration problems
 - Scholastic underachievement or excessive resistance to doing work
 - Frequent visits to school nurse
 - High number of missed school days
 - Difficulties with social or peer group (i.e. worrying obsessively about what others think of you).

What does anxiety look like?

Symptoms of general anxiety can include: stomach aches, headaches, difficulty sleeping, avoiding school, nail biting and physical reactions such as increased heart rate or breathing.

Canadian researcher Dr Lynn Miller has also found that there are many frequently overlooked symptoms of anxiety:

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How to help an anxious child

Many parents I speak to wonder if they should try to 'toughen up' their sensitive worriers, but I would caution against this approach. Sometimes pushing a fearful child who's not ready can just make the fear even more real.

Rather, I think parents can build their child's capacity by gently walking them through some of the things they need to face with lots of love, lots of reassurance and lots of soothing.

Assess the environment

If a child is experiencing anxiety, or even to prevent anxiety, try to look at their environment through their eyes and ears.

For example, a huge trigger for children is listening to or watching the news. We

must be very mindful of not leaving TVs or radios on around children, exposing them to reports and/or images of disaster, death or trauma. Even online, be mindful if your home page is a news page that may sometimes feature horrific images.

To help prevent anxiety becoming an issue we can make childcare choices that suit our children, particularly being mindful of our sensitive children or children under two who are often developmentally unable to manage environments that cause them stress.

These children really need a 'mothering' influence. This can come from mum, dad or someone else. I encourage parents to co-parent around work schedules as much as possible and seek care with trusted relatives, friends or family day care.

TOP TIPS FOR REDUCING ANXIETY:

- 1 Slow things down, leaving plenty of time for transition between activities.
- 2 Have good routines particularly around eating and sleeping.
- 3 Soothe your child with safe, loving touch and warmth – lots of cuddles, and rubbing the 'tickle point' at the base of their neck.
- 4 Don't overschedule your children's lives or put too much pressure on them to perform/achieve.
- 5 Make time for silence and relaxation every day. Research shows 10 minutes has proven benefits for the whole family.
- 6 For separation anxiety, make an effort to build 'love bridges' with kids: take a small bite out of their sandwich before placing it in the lunchbox; place kisses in their hands to hold onto all day; lay with them at night. Little things are big things to kids.

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