



Supporting Children with Anxiety – The Role of the Parent and Educator

Introduction

Anxiety is a general term for several disorders that cause nervousness, fear, apprehension, and worrying. These disorders affect how we feel and behave, and they can manifest real physical symptoms. Mild anxiety is vague and unsettling, while severe anxiety can be extremely debilitating, having a serious impact on daily life.

Anxiety in children is a normal part of childhood development – approximately 8-22% of children experience anxiety more intensely and more often than other children, stopping them from getting the most out of life. Helping children deal positively with anxiety requires an understanding of firstly what is a normal anxiety response and what is an actual anxiety disorder. If a child has an anxiety disorder they need to be referred to professional support. There are many parenting strategies to support a child who may be going through the normal range of anxiety responses.

In this fact sheet we define the difference between an anxiety disorder (clinical anxiety) and a normal anxiety response. We then unpack the variety of factors that can impact on a child's anxiety response. The fact sheet finishes with some parenting strategies that may help all children deal with challenges in life in a positive and resilient way.

1. Anxiety disorder (Clinical Anxiety)

Most children have fears or worries of some kind, however if any of the following apply to your child it is suggested you seek professional support. Is your child's anxiety;

- Stopping him/her from doing things he/she wants to do - lifestyle inhibited, limiting?
- Interfering with his/her friendships, schoolwork or family life?
- Significantly different from that of other children of a similar age and stage of development?
- Causing extreme distress that is hard to settle?
- Leading to obsessive behaviour – eg washing hands?
- Resulting in long-term school refusal?
- Leading to pulling their hair out?
- Influence their toileting – eg withholding?
- Leading to repeatedly banging their head?
- Causing them to self-harm?

2. Characteristics Associated with Increased Anxiety

It is normal for all children (and adults) to experience anxiety, however some children are naturally more anxious than other children. This is generally a reflection of the following characteristics



Heredity

Some children have a genetic predisposition to being more anxious than others.

Temperament

Children who have an “intense” or a “slow to warm up” temperament (or personality) are more likely to find some situations more challenging than other children, which may lead to increased anxiety. Aim for a goodness of fit.

Resilience

Children who are more resilient, who are able to have another go, to try again, bounce back, deal with set backs are more likely to deal with challenging situations without significant levels of anxiety.

Intrinsic motivation

Children who are intrinsically (rather than extrinsically) motivated, who are encouraged for their effort and understand the consequences of their actions are likely to have reduced anxiety when being faced with challenges.

2. Environmental factors associated with increased anxiety

A predisposition to being anxious does not mean that a child will necessarily experience severe anxiety. There are many things children experience in 21st Century living that can exacerbate their anxiety. These include:

“Push down” expectations

Increasingly children are expected to behave, understand and perform in ways that are beyond their years. Children are being thrust into a life of inappropriate expectations that set them up to fail, to worry and to become anxious. These include:

- Expectations that children behave, think and respond to situations like adults;
- Lack of differentiation in parenting and education according to a child’s temperament and or stage of development;
- Children being rushed, hurried and over scheduled;
- The belief that giving children as many opportunities as possible, as early as possible is best.

Other Issues

In addition to “push down’ expectations the following factors can result in children experiencing more severe anxiety

- Focus on academic achievement at the expense of social and emotional development;
- Focus on extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation;
- Family break down and distress;
- Children not being given the opportunity to practise being resilient;
- Focus on extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation;
- Social and friendship issues (older children) – social media;



We are facing a modern day paradox – we want to give children everything but inadvertently we give them less by giving them everything.

Proactive parenting can lay a strong foundation for all children to feel safe, secure, build their resilience and concept of self. This philosophy to parenting is particularly important for children who are more likely to be anxious. The following presents firstly strategies parents can embed in daily family life (proactive parenting strategies), secondly strategies to use when things break down (Practical Strategies when things Break Down) and thirdly how the parent is an important model for children (The adult as the model).

1. Proactive Parenting Strategies

- Remember who is the parent and who is the child
- Consistent parenting between parents
- Never parent by mood
- Routine, consistency and predictability
- Slow the pace of life
- Appropriate expectations
- Encouragement more than praise
- Give lead time - Prepare the child for transition times
- Calm voice
- I wonder why?
- Eye contact
- Be direct and never change your mind
- Apologise when made a mistake
- Avoid battles – choose your battles
- Building relationships
- Empower all family members to have a voice: Family meetings
- Reflect and share their parenting with others
- Own your own stuff “I” messages
- Don’t need to be your child’s best friend

2. Practical Strategies When things Break Down

- Take Five
- Chill Out not Time Out
- Don’t buy into sibling rivalry
- Never ask a question if there isn't a choice
- Say less - act more
- Don’t make eating an issue



- Always end the day well
- Separate your child from their misdeeds and actions
- Circuit Breakers
- Choice (2 to 4 years)
- Distraction (younger than 3 years)
- Consequences (older than 3 years)
- Reflective Listening

Ways to Support Children who Experience Significant Anxiety

If your child shows signs of anxiety, there are several strategies to support them:

- Stay calm and model resilience, avoid being anxious about your child's anxiety
- Acknowledge your child's fear (reflective listening) – don't dismiss, try to rationalise or ignore
- Gently encourage your child to do things that they are anxious about – do not force or punish
- Keep low profile about the issues, avoid pre-empting an anxious behaviour
- Avoid labelling your child as 'shy' or 'anxious'.

Resources

Fact sheets: www.earlylife.com.au

- Building resilience and self-concept
- Encouragement and not just praise
- Consequences; a positive and effective way of disciplining your child

Books by Kathy Walker

- Parenting
- Future proof your children