



Every day counts

Anxiety about going to school

It is normal that, at some stage in life, every individual will feel anxious when faced with a difficult situation. Each individual will cope with anxiety in different ways. During difficult times, you can support your child to cope with anxiety in effective ways and by doing so, enhance their resilience. Anxiety becomes a problem when it is persistent and prevents them from enjoying normal life experiences for a long period of time.

How can I tell if my child has anxiety?

Signs of anxiety in children may include:

- having lots of worries and a strong need for reassurance
- psychosomatic symptoms which occur before school (e.g. feeling nauseous, shortness of breath or headaches). When the threat (fear of going to school) is taken away, the symptoms will reduce.
- crying, being clingy or fidgeting when nervous
- sleep problems such as difficulty falling asleep, nightmares and trouble sleeping alone
- fear and avoidance of a range of issues and situations.

Why are some children anxious about going to school?

Anxiety may affect children at any age. The causes of anxiety may be different for young children than for teenagers:

- Separation anxiety (being afraid to be away from parents)

- Problems at school such as:
 - being bullied
 - not having friends, not fitting in, friendship conflicts
 - feeling lost at school
 - fear of getting into trouble
 - learning difficulties
 - not getting along with a teacher.
- New situations – whether facing the first day in a new grade or the first day in a new school, it's normal to feel nervous in a new situation.
- Failure – worry that their schoolwork will be too hard, they won't be able to keep up, or they won't know the correct answer when called on in class.
- Fear of losing a parent. They may think something bad will happen to a parent due to:
 - a parent being ill
 - family problems and fighting
 - parents separating
 - knowing another child who has lost a parent or whose family has broken up.

What can parents do?

It is important not to dismiss your child's anxiety, but to help them see that the situations they are worried about may not be as bad as they think.

- Listen to your child and encourage them to tell you about their feelings and fears.
- Avoid telling your child to 'get over it'. Your child may perceive this as you not understanding or not caring about their concerns.

- Discuss various scenarios, possible outcomes and ways to handle the situation. This will help put things in perspective.
- Show your child how you cope positively when feeling anxious or stressed. Remain calm and positive when they are feeling anxious so that you can help them feel more confident.
- Avoid taking over or giving your child the impression you will fight their battles for them. Children with anxiety are usually very happy for someone else to do things for them. However, if adults take over for them, it stops them from learning how to cope for themselves as they begin to believe that someone else will rescue them.
- If your child is anxious about failure, remind your child that everyone makes mistakes and that you can learn from mistakes. Praise their best efforts.
- Talk with school staff to find out what assistance the school can provide.
- If your child has problems walking through the school front gate or getting on the bus, arrange for them to meet a friend before school so they can go to school together. Alternatively, check if there is another entrance to the school that your child feels more comfortable using.
- If your child delays getting ready for school so that they will be late, encourage them to still go to school and reassure them that you will contact the school to explain why they are late.
- Should your child find socialising before school a source of anxiety, arrange for them to arrive just before the bell.
- Be involved in your child's school (e.g. volunteer in the tuckshop, help with the classroom reading program, or join the P&C). Support your child with homework and study, modelling skills for becoming more independent.

Further assistance

Sometimes, all of these things do not work and you may need assistance from professionals who can help anxious children. Discuss your concerns with relevant teachers or year level coordinators to resolve any school-based issues. If your child requires additional support, the school's guidance officer or school-based youth health nurse may assist with anxiety support for your child (in an age-

appropriate way) or with a referral to professional support. Alternatively, you can manage your concerns regarding your child's anxiety with your doctor, who can assist you with a referral to a mental health professional such as a psychologist, psychiatrist or therapist. Children can be helped to overcome their anxiety by using methods such as relaxation, improving self-esteem, improving confidence and changing the way they think about difficult situations.

Did you know?

- Approximately 1 in 14 children and teenagers in Australia experience anxiety.
- Children with anxiety symptoms that are left untreated may be at a higher risk to perform poorly in school and of developing other mental health difficulties like depression, eating disorders and self-harm.
- Anxiety disorders that start in childhood often persist into the teenage years and early adulthood.

Useful websites

- Ten Hints for Creating Resilient Families
<http://andrewfuller.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Ten-Resilience-Hints.pdf>
- Parent resources to learn more about preventing bullying and cyberbullying
<https://education.qld.gov.au/parents-and-carers/parent-participation/parent-resources/bullying>
- Supporting student's wellbeing and mental health
<https://education.qld.gov.au/students/student-health-safety-wellbeing/student-wellbeing>
- Kids Helpline
<http://www.kidshelp.com.au/>
- The Australian Parenting Website
<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>
- ReachOut.com
<http://au.reachout.com/>
- Youth – Health and looking after yourself
<http://www.qld.gov.au/youth/health-looking-after-yourself/>