

Managing worries and fears in children

Anxiety, Worries and Fears are Normal

Everyone, at all ages and stages, experiences anxiety and fears throughout their life. The feelings that this worry and anxiety produces can be very uncomfortable and difficult to manage. Anxiety is not only normal, it can also be very useful; being anxious can help people behave in ways that are safe. For instance, if someone is afraid of heights, it means that they are careful in dangerous situations involving heights.

The nature of fears and anxieties can change as we progress through our childhood and develop:

- ✔ Babies are more likely to experience fear of strangers when confronted by people they don't know.
- ✔ It is more common for toddlers to have fear of separation from their parents, and can become emotionally distressed when parents leave.
- ✔ For younger school-aged children, fears are often ones that are based on fantasy, such as fear of monsters or ghosts.
- ✔ Older school aged children often begin to fear things that can actually happen, such as natural disasters or bodily harm.
- ✔ As children grow older their fears will change or disappear, or be linked to one particular object or animal, such as fear of dogs, or spiders.
- ✔ When a child has an illness, such as cancer, where they have to undergo a number of procedures and take different medications, sometimes this can cause children to become worried, and show some emotional distress. At the same time, it is a difficult time for parents/caregivers, as well.

What are some of the signs and symptoms in children?

Some of the signs and symptoms of worry and anxiety include:

- ✔ Sweaty palms
- ✔ Racing heart
- ✔ Becoming clingy
- ✔ Trouble with sleeping
- ✔ Fast breathing
- ✔ Nausea
- ✔ Headaches
- ✔ Avoidance of the situation
- ✔ Anger

How can parents help their child manage their worries?

As highlighted previously, it is often a difficult time for parents and caregivers. It will be helpful that you are able to respond to your child's worries and fears in a calm and reassuring way. Teaching children to manage their fears and worries will assist them with coping with difficulties and challenges in later life. Below are some suggestions that might be helpful:

- ✔ **Communicate empathy** – express your understanding of your child's worries to ensure that they feel listened to and supported. Following this, you can move to help your child with problem solving and ways that might help them feel less worried.

- ✔ **Promoting and prompting your child's coping** – identify things that your child already does that work, and build on these with your child.
- ✔ **Modelling behaviour** – one way that children learn how to behave is modelling others. A good type of model is a 'coping model', which shows that everyone experiences fear and worries, and also can show how to cope constructively with these difficulties.
- ✔ **Being aware of your own emotions** – and try to manage these effectively. As understandable as it is to get emotional and frustrated, it is important to remember that you will be less helpful as a coach if you are highly emotional (e.g. anxious, angry). Try to ensure that you use your own coping strategies that you have developed.
- ✔ **Being consistent** – attempt to keep your child's environment as consistent as possible. Although this will be difficult with visits and stays in the hospital, there may be many small things that can be kept as they were prior to the illness.
- ✔ **Relaxation** – everyone can benefit from learning to relax. Relaxation exercises are a great way to reduce stress and tension. Work out with your child how they like to relax, this may be listening to music, or being active and jumping on a trampoline. Ensure that your child has an opportunity each day to do something that they find relaxing.
- ✔ **Discourage avoidance** – as this will only serve to increase the fear and anxiety. Reward your child when they try to do things that make them anxious or worried.
- ✔ **Distinguishing between anxious and naughty behaviour** – this can be difficult to do, as these behaviours can look very similar, however they have very different meanings. It is important to look at when the behaviours are occurring, and looking for patterns e.g. if the behaviours are associated with only one situation.
- ✔ **Acknowledge and reward behaviour** – a reward system can sometimes help to encourage certain behaviours. N.B. this should focus on one particular behaviour at a time, and expected behaviours should be clear and concise.
- ✔ **Do not give up on strategies immediately** - some strategies may take more time to work, or for your child to get used to. Talk with your child about what they find useful, as you may have to adapt strategies to ensure it is helpful.
- ✔ **Information** – keep your child informed of necessary and anticipated changes, such as changes to routines or situation.

If you are concerned about your child's level of behavioural or emotional distress, please talk to a member of your treating team about a referral to our mental health service.