



Anxiety in Children

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is normal. In fact, it is a survival mechanism. It is our body's way of keeping us safe. It helps us respond to a threat by telling our body to prepare to fight, flee from the danger, or freeze. However, sometimes our brain 'misfires' and tells our body to prepare for danger when there really isn't a danger present, and this causes a very uncomfortable feeling. It can make our bodies feel irritable or charged up. It can make us become quiet and still. Or, it can make us shy away from activities. It might be a problem when this happens repeatedly and begins to interfere with a child's ability to attend school; join social, athletic or recreational clubs; or meet age expected demands such as sleeping through the night, doing homework, and making friends.

When children (or adults) face a fear, either real or perceived, their natural response is to react with **fight, flight** or **freeze**. When our bodies respond with **fight** it can come across as aggression, both verbal (yelling out and arguing) or physical (throwing, kicking, shoving). It can cause irritability and defensiveness. We experience increased heart rate and muscle tenseness as our bodies prepare to respond. When our bodies go into **flight** mode, it means we may physically run from the stressor, ask to use the washroom repeatedly or sharpen a pencil, avoid the task altogether, or refuse to participate. When we **freeze**, we do just that, freeze in place. We can also feel numb or detached, break down in tears, and either give up on the task entirely or develop a sense of perfectionism because we are frozen in fear of making an error and become consumed with making it perfect.



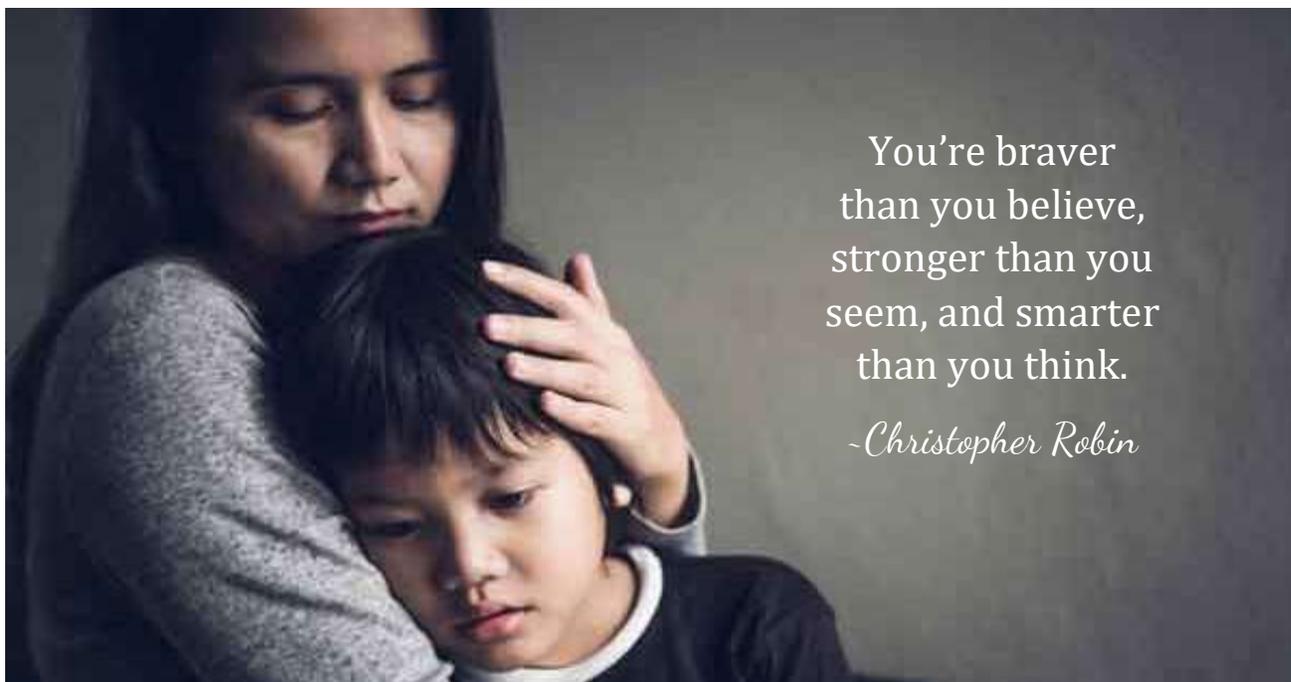
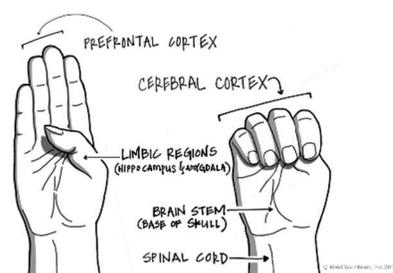
Anxiety is one of the most common mental health concerns for children and adults, affecting upwards of 20% of children and adults over the lifespan.
(Anxietycanada.com)

Anxious feelings show themselves in four ways: *physical responses* (upset stomach, shaking, sweaty palms), *thoughts* (“I’m no good,” “everyone is going to laugh at me”), *emotions* (fear, irritability), and *behaviours* (crying, clinging, lashing out). How these symptoms display themselves can be quite different in each child, and this often makes it challenging to determine how much of what you are seeing is anxiety or something else, for example, an attention issue or learning challenge. Sometimes children grow out of their anxiety, but other times, the anxiety increases over time and becomes debilitating.

Flipping your lid

What is happening in our brains when we become anxious? Buried deep in our brain there is a structure called the Amygdala. It is the role of the Amygdala to sense a danger and tell our body to respond with flight, flight or freeze. When the Amygdala fires, it causes the parts of our brain that are responsible for rational thought (Prefrontal Cortex and Cerebral Cortex) to *flip*, allowing the Amygdala to take charge. When faced with a real danger, this automatic response is important; however, when our brains *misfires*, or perceives a threat when there is no actual danger, this is a challenge, and we need to wait for our *lid* to close in order to problem solve. This is why it is so difficult to rationalize with a child in the throws of a temper tantrum, or even to think clearly after something unexpected, like being in a car accident. Our brains go into survival mode rather than problem solving mode. To help *close the lid*, it is helpful to do such things as deep breathing, or muscle tensing and relaxing (see page 6 for strategies). (Dr. Dan Siegel - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOT_2NN0C68)

Hand Model of the Brain



You're braver
than you believe,
stronger than you
seem, and smarter
than you think.

-Christopher Robin

Where does it come from?

While a certain amount of anxiety is natural and even helpful as it can push us to try our best, some people experience more anxiety than others and it interferes with normal functioning. Biological factors, family factors, exposure to trauma, and environmental factors can determine how we respond to anxiety.

Biological factors

The brain has certain chemicals that allow it to send messages back and forth, controlling what we do, think, and feel. Serotonin and Dopamine are two important neurotransmitters (mood-regulating hormones) that work together to help us feel happier, calmer, and more focused and motivated. Low or elevated levels of either hormone may negatively impact mood, appetite or sleep, and can increase feeling anxious.

Family factors

Just as a child can inherit height, eye colour or athletic ability from a parent, they can also inherit their parent's anxiety. Additionally, anxiety may be learned from a family member or caregiver who is extremely anxious around the child. Children are keen observers of their parent/caregiver's behaviour and how they respond to stressors. If a parent is fearful of spiders or heights, their child may witness this behaviour and take on that anxiety as their own (it can be contagious!).

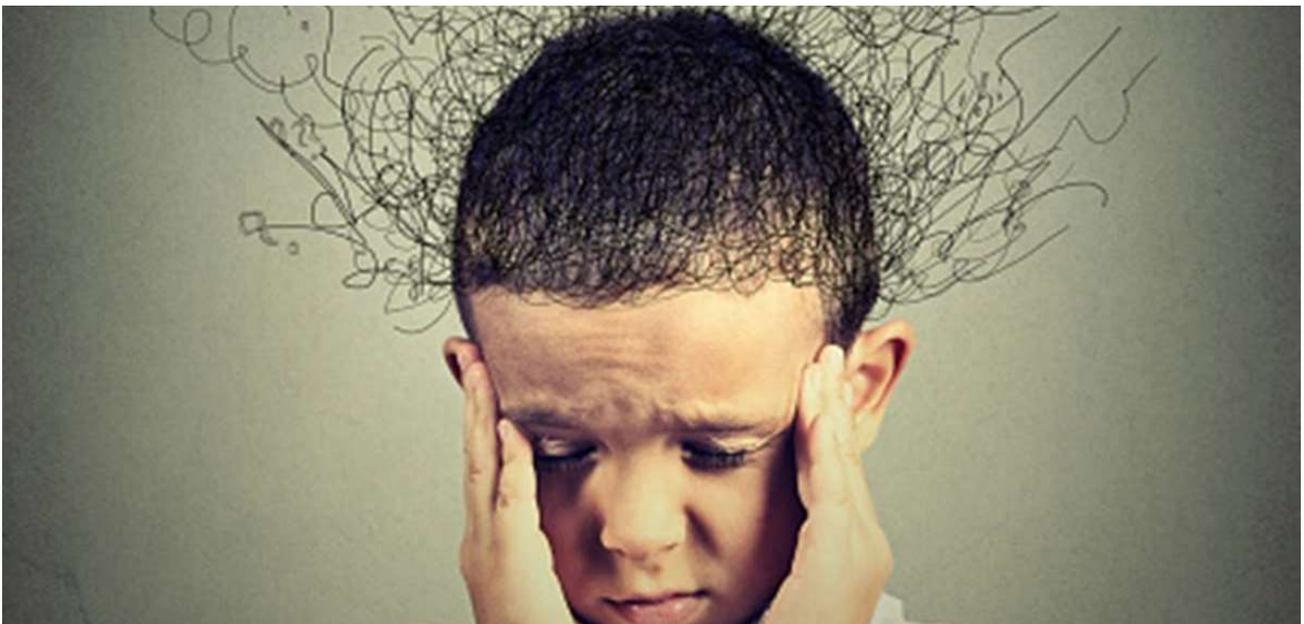
Trauma

Children who endure abuse or trauma, or witness a traumatic event, are at a higher risk of developing an anxiety disorder at some point in life.

Environmental factors

Changes in environment (such as a divorce, moving, changing schools, illness, or death in the family) may also trigger the onset of anxiety. Additionally, a medical condition, such as a severe allergy, can cause a child to develop anxiety because they may be in constant fear of being exposed to the allergen and having a reaction.

* It is important to note that what may cause anxious feelings in one child may not in another.





When should I be concerned?

At different ages and phases of your child's development, a certain amount of anxiety is normal. For example, being nervous when meeting a new teacher, or the first time saying a speech in front of the class. However, it may be time to be concerned when:

- a child experiences anxiety more **often** and more **intensely** than children of the same age
- anxiety **increases** rather than decreases as your child ages, i.e., they do not seem to grow out of a *phase* the way other kids their age do,
- and the level of worry **disrupts** other areas of their life.

It is this combination of **excessive** anxiety and **disruption** in daily activities that occurs most days and for months at a time, that tells us that anxiety has become a problem.

Common examples of **excessive anxiety and distress** include:

- Complaints of an upset stomach or other physical woes (may be changes in appetite)
- Constantly looking for reassurance and comfort
- Crying before going to school, and often more difficulty returning to school after weekend breaks or school holidays
- Crying and tantrums that are inconsistent with age or situation
- Lashing out or screaming
- Trouble going to sleep or staying asleep

Common examples of **interference and disruption** include:

- Failing in school
- Keeping to him/herself or not joining in and making new friends
- Resisting participating in new activities or trying new things
- School refusal/avoidance of tasks or activities
- Setting very high expectations for self and others
- Difficulty sustaining focus and completing tasks

(Anxietycanada.com)

Understood.org has many useful tracking sheets that can be used to help you track your child's anxious feelings to look for common triggers. This can also be a useful tool to bring with you if you choose to speak with your child's doctor or a therapist about their level of worry.

How can I help my child?

Environmental Strategies

- Set and keep routines. Provide warnings when routines will change.
- Provide reminders and notice about upcoming responsibilities, i.e., school and chores
- Model positive ways to cope with unexpected events such as using simple relaxation exercises, i.e., belly breathing (see page 7)
- Encourage children to focus on the here-and-now and not worry about what could happen in the future (live in the moment!)
- Use transitional cues such as clapping, lighting changes, verbal warnings
- Create an environment where mistakes are viewed as a natural part of the learning process (having a growth mindset)
- Use a daily check in time to discuss your child's day, i.e., brags and drags, or their strawberry (favourite) and lemon (least favourite) thing they did that day
- Work physical movement into your child's day, whether this be a family walk, yoga or dance, to boost your feel-good endorphins and distract your child from their daily worries

Academic Strategies

- Chunking tasks into smaller pieces that are more manageable and chunk time – work for designated amount of time then take a break
- Make and keep a consistent schedule
- Check for understanding at regular intervals
- Avoid time pressured tasks
- Connect with your child's school to identify a 'caring adult' or someone with whom your child identifies and feels safe. If needed, your child could 'check in' with that person each morning to help them transition into the school and get ready for their day
- Use self-coaching mantras such as 'this is tough but I'm tougher'

Normalize Feelings

- Let your child know that you understand it can be hard to focus and think straight when they are feeling anxious and that makes them feel like they cannot do the task, but they can once their 'lid is closed'
- Remind your child that they are likely not alone with their worries (think – do their friends or peers have similar worries too?)
- Provide your child with information about anxiety, e.g., anxiety shows up in our thoughts, feelings, and in physical symptoms
- Use detective-like thinking to challenge worried thoughts or 'negative thinking,' i.e., what is the evidence? What else could happen? What is the chance it could actually happen? If the worst possible thing happened, how would you cope?
- Focus on positive behaviour, not anxious behaviour
- When we see anyone being sad and blue, we want to rush to give them reassurance. But giving too much reassurance can actually feed anxiety. It is okay to provide your child with some reassurance, especially when faced with a new stressor (e.g., changing schools). But watch out for giving too much reassurance. If your child keeps seeking more reassurance (asking a lot of the same question, wanting you to calm them and tell them it's alright over and over), this can be an obsession. This can feed a child's anxiety.



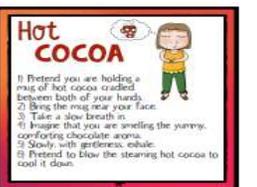
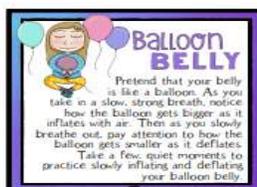
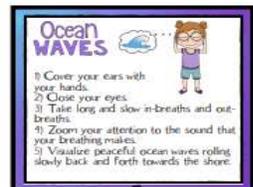
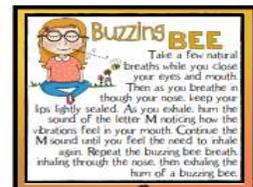
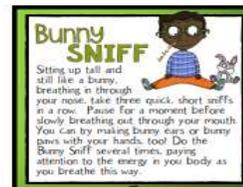
- Work with your child to label their feelings (i.e., worry, scared, uncomfortable)
- Help your child identify how big the feeling or worry is and give you an idea of how it feels to them, e.g., is it an ant or an elephant?; is it a 1 or a 10?; is it red, yellow or blue?

Validate Feelings

- When your child is feeling anxious, we want to address the feeling they are experiencing and not the event/action that brought about the feeling.
- It is important to not minimize or dismiss their struggles, for example, comments blanket statements such as “don’t worry about that,” or “this won’t matter a year from now,” will make your child feel that their feelings are not important or valid.
- Don’t try to fix or to talk your child out of their feelings – remember their feelings are real to them, no matter your opinion.
- Stay positive and use “and” instead of “but,” for example, “I know you are worried about your test today, and that means that you want to do well. And I know that your studying has prepared you well.”
- Say things like: “no wonder you are feeling _____ (emotional pain word), because _____ and _____.”
- When children feel validated, they will be better able to hear you and change their own behaviours

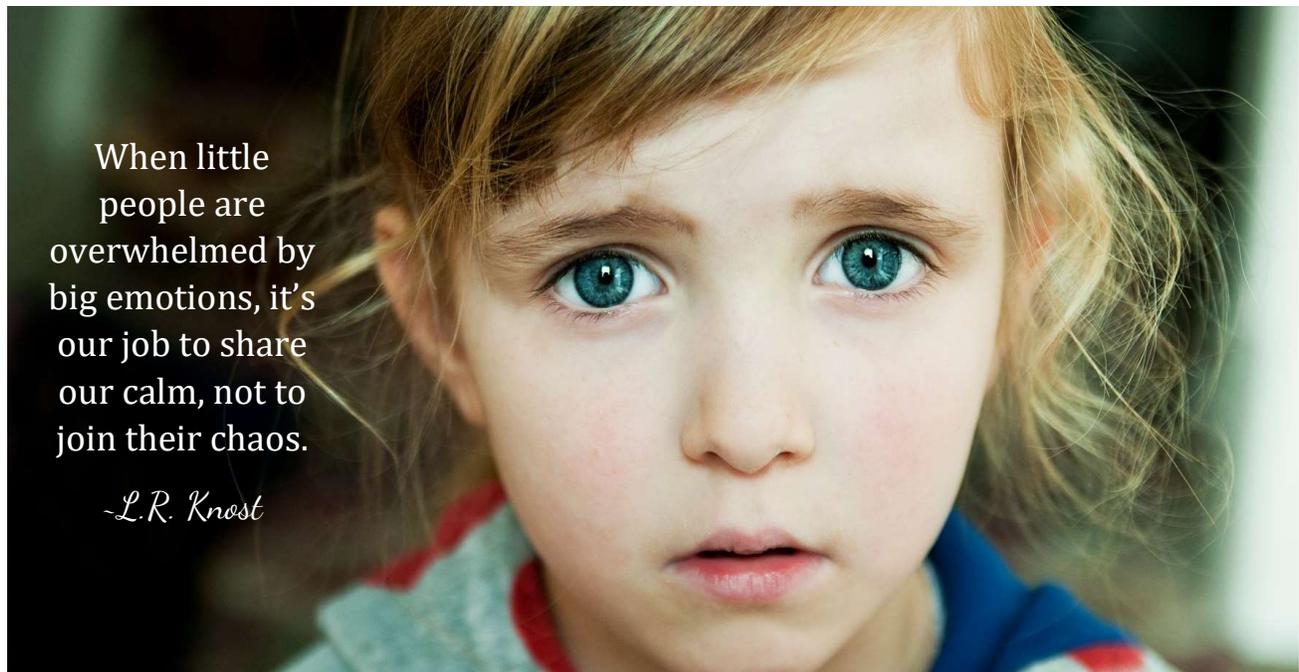
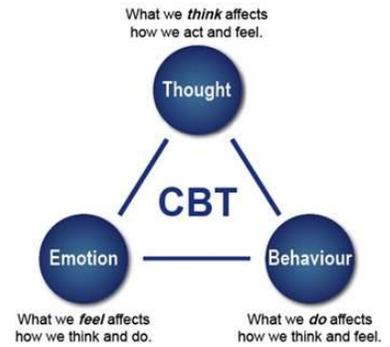
Mindful breathing

- Taking deep, slow breaths (belly breathing) signals our body to release hormones that cue the brain and body to relax by slowing the heart rate and increasing focus. Breathing is a natural stress-reducer. It is like pressing the reset button, or overriding a fight, flight, or freeze response, and avoids setting off the Amygdala. This gives control back to the problem solving parts of the brain to allow for a more planned response, instead of acting on impulse when feeling anxious (*closing the lid*). It also quiets the brain so it can concentrate on the present moment. The more deep belly breathing is practiced, the more it will reduce the production of hormones associated with stress (cortisol), and can help change future reactions to stress.
- Learning how to stay calm is a very important life skill. The purpose of calm breathing is not to avoid anxiety but can help reduce feeling overwhelmed and provide a sense of control. Deep breathing can be used anytime - it is portable and always with you!
- There are many ways to focus on breathing. Begin slowly, and find a technique that your child likes and can do easily. Introduce deep breathing when your child is happy and calm and practice it in different environment and situations. Also, modeling deep breathing is a powerful teaching tool.



Some kids will need more....

Some kids will need more than what we, as parents/caregivers, can offer. When the intensity, duration and level of disruption become concerning, it may be time to seek professional help or 'clinical intervention.' This means they may need to meet with a doctor, psychologist or social worker to learn how to deal with their anxiety such that it does not *take over* their life and stop them from engaging in activities that are typical for someone their age. The most common type of therapy used to treat anxiety is called **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy**, often called CBT. This is a type of talk therapy that teaches kids new ways of thinking and behaving that can help them to control their anxiety in the long-run. It teaches them how to change their thoughts and actions. It helps them to understand that in any given situation, they will have thoughts and feelings that cause them to behave in a certain way. Those thoughts, feelings and actions all interact and influence each other. CBT helps kids to change their behaviour or their thoughts, and thus their behaviours. If kids can be encouraged to change the way they think and behave, then it will also change how they feel.



Helpful Resources

Websites

Anxiety Canada - anxietycanada.ca

Anxiety Coach - anxietycoach.com

Children's Mental Health Ontario - cmho.org

Hamilton Health Sciences - hamiltonhealthsciences.ca

Psychology Foundation of Canada - psychologyfoundationofcanada.com

Reach Out Centre for Kids (ROCK) - rockonline.ca

School Mental Health Ontario - smho-smso.ca

Teen Mental Health - teenmentalhealth.org

Understood - understood.org

Worry Wise Kids - worrywisekids.org

Books

Freeing Your Child From Anxiety, Tamar Chansky, Ph.D.

Helping your Anxious Child, Ronald M. Rapee

The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook: Proven Techniques for Overcoming Your Fears, M. Anthony, Ph.D. and R. Swinson, MD

Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child, Dr. Katharina Manassis

Worried No More, Second Edition: Help and Hope for Anxious Children, Aureen Wagner, Ph.D.

CRISIS: Call 911 / Visit your local hospital emergency room

URGENT:

Kids Help Phone 

24/7 counselling and information for youth:

- 1-800-668-6868
- kidshelpphone.ca

COAST

Mental health crisis outreach and support for all ages.

- 905-972-8338
- coasthamilton.ca

NON-URGENT:

HWDSB Helps.

Get help or share anonymous tips using...

- Text to 905-963-0066 (standard rates apply)
- The HWDSB Helps app for iOS and Android.
- Web chat - www.hwdsb.on.ca/wehelp