

Anxiety Disorders in Children and Teenagers

When anxiety is seen in children or teenagers it is the result of excessive worry, whether it is over relationships at home or at school and their anxiety is also related to fears they are experiencing. Children that suffer from anxiety do not feel that they have control over their current situation and their fears are usually irrational; however the fears are very real for the child. A child's temperament also has a lot to do with anxiety seen in children and there are a variety of different types of anxiety disorders that are seen in a mental health setting.

One type of anxiety disorder that is seen in a very young child is Separation Anxiety Disorder. To have fear or anxiety when a child is separated at a very young age from their parents is absolutely normal. However, when a child's fears are irrational and their level of anxiety is excessive when they are separated from their parents, this may be separation anxiety. This disorder will usually present itself at a very young age, however to qualify for this diagnosis the symptoms of anxiety persist for a period of at least four weeks.

An anxiety disorder that is seen in children a bit older, approximately between the ages of six to nine years is specific phobias. A specific phobia is the marked or persistent fear that is excessive and unreasonable and the fear or anxiety is cued by the presence of a particular object or situation. Phobias that are very common in children are fear of heights, fear of being in the dark, or dogs or cats, loud noises, or thunderstorms. If the fear is excessive and persists, then professional help is needed. Research has shown that most anxiety disorders that are left untreated during childhood will continue to persist and the symptoms will be exacerbated by adulthood.

Anxiety disorders that are often seen during middle childhood are generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and social anxiety disorder. While panic disorder is not seen as much in teenagers or during adolescence, it is often seen and can be very scary for older children and teenagers. Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is a very common anxiety disorder that is seen in children, adolescents, and adults alike. GAD is when a child or teenager has excessive anxiety or worry occurring more than days than not over a period of six months over a number of events. In essence, these children seem to worry about everything and they find it difficult to control their worry symptoms. They also experience a number of physical symptoms such as fatigue, difficulty sleeping, irritability, muscle tension, and they have difficulty relaxing or winding down.

Social anxiety disorder is the persistent fear or one or more social or performance situations in which a person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others. In children, there must be evidence of the capacity for age-appropriate social relationships with familiar people and the anxiety must occur in peer settings, not just in interactions with adults.

Panic Disorder, whether a child or adolescent experiences the panic attack with or without Agoraphobia, is truly a very scary experience for them. Patients that I have seen over the years describe having a panic attack as the feeling that they are having a heart attack or that they are going to die. A panic attack is defined as a discrete period of intense fear or discomfort, in which four (or more) of the following symptoms developed abruptly and reached a peak within ten minutes. The symptoms of a panic attack are the same whether they are seen in a child or in an adult. They are heart palpitations, feeling dizzy, feeling of choking, trembling or shaking, shortness of breath, sweating, fear of dying, nausea, chest pain, feelings of unreality, chills or hot flashes, numbness or a tingling sensation, and the fear of going crazy.

While this list is not conclusive of all of the anxiety disorders, the preceding anxiety disorders listed are those that are frequently seen in children and adolescence in a mental health setting. While children will experience the symptoms of anxiety in a very similar way as those seen in adult, the way that they handle or cope with the anxiety is very different and adults are often at a loss as to what to do to help their child. First, by understanding what constitutes an anxiety disorder, a parent is able to identify the symptoms and then develop a plan of action to obtain help for their child.

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