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MENU



## When Does a Child's Anxiety Become a Problem?

December 9, 2013 By [Nicola Young](#) — [42 Comments](#)

### Is this scenario familiar to you?

Daughter or son asks 'can you help me with my homework?'

You sit down together and within minutes there are tears and tantrums because your child does not understand something and somehow you are failing to explain it to them. Result: said child storms off to his/her room/you have a row and homework gets left unfinished.

This is not an uncommon scenario. What has happened here is that this child has let their anxiety about their homework overcome their actual ability to be able to complete the task.

Anxiety is normal and everyone experiences it at various points in their lives. It is not dangerous. In fact it is a mechanism which we have developed in order to help us survive; the 'fight or flight' response is a survival tool that helps us to prepare for danger. Of course, we don't spend our days running away from large animals that might want to eat us, but we may get nervous or anxious before a performance, exam or sports event, for example. A little bit of nerves can help us to prepare and focus. However, if anxiety occurs when there is no real danger or for no apparent reason, then it may be more of an issue.



Most children or young adults will worry about

school work, friendships or appearances, but anxiety about these issues and others like it shouldn't prevent them from going out in public, keeping them from seeing friends or going about normal activities.

## How would you recognise anxiety in your own child?

- Feeling shaky, sick, stomach cramps, dizzy or faint

A study by Vanderbilt University (as reported by New York Times Well) found a link between functional stomach pain (stomach pain that occurred for no apparent medical reason) in children and anxiety disorders in young adulthood.

- Breathing fast or difficulties catching their breath
- Palpitations & sweating.

**Behaviourally**, children suffering from anxiety may lack confidence, especially when trying new things. They may panic or embarrass easily and be a worrier. Lack of concentration and problems with eating or sleeping are common, as are angry outbursts, during which they feel out of control.

## What causes the anxiety?

It is difficult to pinpoint an exact cause and it may be down to an individual's own temperament and personality. They may naturally be a worrier, but it can run in the family too. Experiences and events can also lead to anxiety problems, for example, bereavement or an illness in the family, divorce or family disputes, moving house or schools, or bullying.

## What can you do to help?

- First of all (although easier said than done), try not to let your child's anxiety and negativity affect you and the rest of the family. Acknowledge the problem and try to get your child to talk openly to you about what their worries are.
- We know that many of the things that worry our children are short lived, but to them it often feels like a problem that may never go away. It is important to show understanding, perhaps by sharing your own experiences as a child. This way you can show them that you know how they feel, whilst at the same time trying to introduce some perspective.
- Give your child ways of dealing with a problem, but without actually fixing it for them. As much as you want to you can't run to your child's defence every time they need you. Otherwise they will never learn how to handle things on their own.
- Do you worry openly about things in front of your children? If you lead by example, by showing your child that you can deal with situations in a positive way, this will affect how they view and deal with situations themselves.

I made a terrible blunder with my own daughter the other day. I had been asked to provide a barnyard animal costume for her nativity performance and on the very same day that I ordered one on the internet, she came bounding out of school exclaiming 'guess what, mummy I'm playing Mary now!'

Instead of reacting by congratulating her and reflecting her excitement I said 'But I just bought you a sheep costume!' So I then spent the entire evening trying to convince my daughter that she would not be able to wear the sheep costume whilst playing Mary in the nativity play and that it was ok that I bought it, as I was sure we would use it another year, or for dress up around the house.

My silly over reaction at having paid out money to buy a costume that we no longer required caused my daughter to worry about the fact that her role in the nativity had changed, to the point

that she was trying to please me by coming up with a way to do both.

Needless to say, as much as you may try to be positive around your children, there are occasions when you might fail, as I can testify to. But as well as your own actions, there are other ways of instilling positive thinking into your children. There are a multitude of books available that address the issues that affect young children and help them to put things in to perspective. They range from picture books, right through to self-help books for young adults, concentrating on issues like:

- The benefits of having a positive attitude over a negative one
- Learning to love yourself the way you are
- Standing up for what is right
- Learning to love new things
- Realising there are people around you who love you
- Being grateful for what you have
- Learning from your mistakes and moving on
- Not letting other people bring you down
- Finding your passion and embracing it – having goals and dreams

Repeating these messages over and over can only serve to help your child as they come up against challenging situations. However, if you feel that the anxiety your child suffers from requires more help than you can give, then it may be an idea to firstly talk to their school. Many schools now have systems in place to help children who find situations more difficult than others. You can also talk to your GP, if your school is unable to help you. Either way having a neutral person to help your child understand why they feel the way they do and what they can do to overcome it is a positive step in the right direction.

Have you ever had to deal with anxiety issues amongst your own children?

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### Nicola Young

Nicola Young is a freelance copywriter, with experience in all aspects of commercial writing, including articles, newsletters, press releases and web content. She also writes young adult and children's fiction and regularly blogs about her own family life.

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