

GOT CLINGY KIDS?

Recognizing and Treating Anxiety Disorders

"To me, raising kids is just about the most exciting, maddening, rewarding, exhausting, puzzling, and satisfying occupation there is. There's no foolproof system, because all kids are different. But there's no area in the world where loving common sense and a touch of humor pay such big dividends."

... Art Linkletter

For most kindergartners the first days of school present a major challenge. The long awaited first day of school has finally arrived. The anticipation is over. It's the big day! It's time for "real school!"

Many young children approach the first days/weeks of school with feelings of excitement and fear. At one moment they want to shout for joy, proud to be growing up and the next moment they are ready to cry, fearful of what the future may have in store for them. For parents too there can be mixed feelings: proud to have a child in kindergarten yet sad that the preschool days are over.

Kindergartners typically go to school with both pleasure and fear. In the world of a preschooler awareness and capabilities are in better balance but kindergarten brings a much wider world with only limited experience.

Parents and teachers need to work together to help each child achieve a good transition and balance between these two worlds. Praise is a magic tonic! Praise helps children choose which of many directions to take. Patience and understanding in large doses are also important to a good adjustment to this new environment of "real" school.

Parents and teachers both need to recognize the fact that there will be some new tasks which may cause temporary anxiety in a child; however, it is also equally important to recognize and deal with the beginnings of an anxiety disorder.

"Anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent childhood psychological disorders (McLoone, 1.)." These disorders affect one out of ten children in a classroom setting (Conner, 1.) However, there are a few strategies parents and teachers can use before the school year begins to help children cope with some of these stresses.

If you, as a parent, have an overly anxious child (or you yourself are overly anxious) and you notice a "fear of meeting new people, avoidance of social situations, and few friends outside the family" (The Anxious Child, 1.), do not wait! Immediately take steps to relieve stress and allay fears.

You may choose to visit the school. Hold your child's hand and walk around the outside - discuss its size, location, etc. Then pay particular attention to the kindergarten area - size and location and how it might feel cozy and comfortable because it's a small self contained area.

Another intervention would be to invite the teacher to come to tea in your home. Help your child prepare the refreshments and point out to your child that teachers are like mommies and

daddies and in fact they might even have children of their own! Many kindergartens are open for visitors during the day or two before school starts. This is a specific way to introduce children to their new environment. If yours is open do take advantage of this.

Teachers should be watchful for signs of individual and/or group stress and anxiety during the school year. Parents also need to be active in their child's school life by informing teachers of any signals at home.

Recognizing and dealing with symptoms of anxiety is an ongoing process as children continue to grow and the challenges of life become more complex. Separation anxiety is usually the first behavior to surface in the kindergarten.

Behavioral signs of separation anxiety include:

- * frequent complaints about stomach aches and excessive trips to the nurse
- * tantrums
- * regular panic attacks when separated from parents (The Anxious Child, 1.)
- * clinging to parents
- * worrying about the safety of caregivers
- * being afraid of and avoiding social interaction with strangers
- * obsessive-compulsive behavior
- * low self esteem (The Anxious Child, 1.)

According to Michael G. Conner, Psy.D., physical symptoms of anxiety disorder include:

- * headache
- * muscle tension
- * perspiration
- * restlessness
- * tension in the chest and mild stomach ache (Conner, 2.)

Conner also suggests anxiety as a psychological issue which hinders performance in school.

These symptoms include:

- * confusion
- * memory problems
- * distortions of reality
- * meaning of events (Conner, 2.).

"Children have more need of models than of critics."

... Joseph Joubert

If not taken seriously and dealt with wisely, anxieties may heighten and become phobias. A phobia starts innocently enough but as a childhood fear of a certain object or situation intensifies the situation soon gets too big to handle without professional help. (The Anxious Child, 1.)

School phobia, an anxiety brought on by separation from the primary caregiver and new environment, is exhibited so often that it has been given the name Didaskaleinophobia.

(McLoone, 4.). It may also be brought on by learning difficulties, a dysfunctional family and bullying. (McLoone, 4.)

Studies show that children who get reasonable answers to their questions coupled with short, repeated demonstrations (as in the “monster under the bed”) soon become calm and life goes on down a smoother path. Therefore, before a small situation becomes larger than life and out of hand, it is necessary to remain calm, be an open, askable person and take all matters seriously but with good humor!

“Children need love, especially when they don’t deserve it.”

... Anonymous

In severe cases of anxiety, assessment and treatment may be called for. This should be determined by professionals - usually a collaborative effort between the child’s parents, teacher, pediatrician and/or psychologist.

A common form of assessment for young children is a self-report questionnaire. These questionnaires should decipher whether children need treatment and if this treatment is for an anxiety disorder or some other child disorder such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) (McLoone, 4.). This is accomplished by comparing “clinical versus non-clinical levels of anxiety” (McLoone, 4.).

Treatment programs vary as do approaches within them. Two treatment programs known to be successful with anxiety include:

- * medication
- * psychotherapy

Care should be taken with the use of any drug therapy as medication is highly addictive and carries known and unknown side affects. (Introduction: Common Medications for Anxiety Disorders, 1.) (Antidepressant Treats Severe Anxiety in Children, 1.).

Psychotherapy is the most common treatment and is usually tried first (Conner, 2.). This type of therapy requires a time commitment because time needs to be set aside to meet regularly with a physician. Generally a child will be able to overcome his/her anxiety within about three months time. (Conner, 2.).

The four treatment approaches that underlie all psychotherapy programs include:

- * Prolonged Exposure
The child confronts his/her fears head on and gets through the experience with skills such as relaxation or hypnosis (Conner, 3.).
- * Modeling
The child observes another person interacting with the feared task or item (Conner, 3.).

*Contingency Management

The child is rewarded when he/she starts to overcome his/her fear (Conner, 3.).

* Self-Management

The child has techniques to deal with fearful situations and is taught how to predict an upcoming fear (Conner, 3.)

There are many treatment programs directed toward children with anxiety disorders - including but not limited to FRIENDS (helps all children in the classroom), Cool Kids (for at risk children or those showing symptoms of anxiety) , and SSAS (Skills for Social and Academic Success treats students with phobias) (McLoone, 6. and 7.). All three of these programs are known to help all children in a classroom and not just the anxious ones.

According to Stanley Greenspan in his article, "Working With The Child Who Has Anxiety Disorders," teachers can soothe anxious children at school by:

- * making calm gestures
- * providing soothing care
- * allowing (inviting) the child to help
- * making time for the child to adjust to things
- * helping the child feel more comfortable in his/her surroundings
- * allowing children to become familiar with their space
- * creating a soothing environment (Greenspan, 1.).

Ellen Booth Church, an early childhood consultant and speaker for programs across the country, suggests that teachers allow students to personalize their space in order to feel more comfortable in the classroom (Church, E.B., 2.).

Conclusion

When thinking about anxiety and children, parents and teachers need to focus their attention on how children are acting in the classroom and in the home. Keeping in mind that one in ten children are affected by some kind of anxiety disorder, the adults also need to be able to recognize children's symptoms and take appropriate steps toward treatment (Conner, 1.). It is the responsibility of the adults in a child's life, be it parent, teacher, caregiver ... to help them acquire the necessary coping skills which will in turn allow them to become educated, responsible and productive members of society.

"If I were asked what single qualification was necessary for one who has the care of children, I should say patience - patience with their tempers, with their understandings, with their progress. It is not brilliant parts or great accomplishments which are necessary for teachers, but patience to go over the first principles again and again; steadily to add a little every day; never to be irritated by willful or accidental hindrances."

... Francois de la Fenelon

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