

General Anxiety

Is your child constantly worrying about everything?



Is your child:

- Saying 'what if' all the time?
- Worrying about something bad happening to parents?
- Seeming to be unaware that these imagined catastrophes are unlikely to come true?
- Wondering, 'What if they don't like me?'
- Asking, 'What if my mom forgets to pick me up from school?'
- Always 'sweating the small stuff?'
- Feeling butterflies in his or her stomach?
- Experiencing headaches, sweaty palms, or racing heart?
- Apologizing incessantly for things that are not a big deal?

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

If your child has a serious case of the 'what ifs', he or she may be an excessive worrier. Often, self-proclaimed 'worry warts' or 'Nervous Nellies' spend a lot of energy on implausible or relatively small events. They might wonder about the zombie apocalypse or the day the sun grows so big that it burns up the earth. They may worry about 'little

things' like what if we are late for school or if I forget my snow boots on a snow day? The child may appear restless or have trouble sleeping. If a friend leaves her out of a game, she may worry that no one likes her. If a dog barks, he may worry he will be bitten. She may worry the house will catch fire. He may check his grades constantly. It may be that your child is very sensitive and rule-following; even the slightest redirection may lead to sobbing and feelings of regret. Your child may be irritable or restless about the slightest thing. He may feel most comfortable at times when he is "in control" and may not like allowing others to make decisions. Some children try to control everything, what they eat, where they sit, which friends they play with, even the weather! A very anxious child may cry when it does not snow on Christmas as she had planned. In extreme cases, she might become constipated from holding her bowels as a means of control. A child who worries may struggle to focus because of internal conflict. She may describe racing thoughts, particularly at night when trying to fall asleep. You may hear questions about death and concerns that you will die or something bad will happen to a close family member or friend.

CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

Anxiety in children is often characterized by racing thoughts, restlessness, a need to be in control, and somatic symptoms. Somatic symptoms are physiological symptoms of emotional distress, like stomach and headaches. Children with somatic symptoms may report that their chest feels tight, they can't breathe, or their stomach is upset. Sometimes the child who worries ends up in the nurse's office because of such complaints. This break from the day may be reinforcing because it can remove a child from worries. Getting out of the classroom removes social pressures and performance anxieties. Some children worry so much that they feel they have to be perfect. These children will not be satisfied with art projects or writing assignments. Often, when asked, the child may self-identify as a "perfectionist." Sometimes children are completely unaware of anxiety and report only perfectionism along with physiological symptoms. Children are not always aware that their worries are excessive.

Generalized anxiety is characterized by worries that occur across settings and have an impact on day-to-day functioning. Everyone worries sometimes, and in fact a reasonable amount of worry can be helpful. Some people worry, for example, "I might fail the test." A bit of worry may mean she is more likely to study, which may have a positive outcome. On the flip side, when a child spends the morning math lesson worrying about whether mom's flight landed safely, the worries get in the way of day-to-day life. Worry can lead to stomachaches, distractibility, racing thoughts and negative self-statements like "I'm not good enough." Eventually, excessive worry can lead to feelings of depression due to plummeting self-esteem or the strain on a person's coping skills.

If worry is an issue for your child, there are fun books he or she can read [1] to learn more. General worries that occur in a number of settings and about a number of different topics are likely to be indicative of generalized anxiety. Other types of anxiety are listed below.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD WORRIES ALL THE TIME

Do acknowledge that you feel worried sometimes yourself. Talk through some worries, like “Traffic was awful, and I was worried I’d be late for work.” Talk about how you handle that worry, noting that everyone makes mistakes and that no one is perfect.

Do share that even though you were worried, it all worked out okay in the end. Explain that most of the things we worry about never come to fruition.

Don’t talk about worries like “I’m worried the local crime spree will hit our neighborhood next.”

Don’t turn on the local news at night if your child tends to worry. Be honest and clear when she asks you a question, but keep in mind that children do not need to be privy to everything. Try to bring up positive things happening in your community and to make statements about safety and security.

Many great resources are available for parents and kids to read when children struggle with anxiety [1]. Parents are also advised to consider reading about ‘taming the worry monster’ [3] and to learn more about what anxiety is in ‘the worried child’ [4].

SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

If your child is struggling with a similar symptom not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.

- [Somatization](#): physiological symptoms of anxiety that accompany excessive worrying; children may be aware of the tummy aches but not attribute them to worry
- [Performance Anxiety](#): anxiety around situations in which you must perform, related to being on “stage”
- [Self-esteem](#): prolonged anxiety can lead to depression and low self-esteem
- [Phobias](#): anxiety related to a single, overwhelming fear. Someone who dissolves into tears whenever a dog comes near may have a phobia of dogs

POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

*Children who have significant problems in this area **may** have any of the following potential disabilities. *Note, this information does **not** serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the ‘Where to Go for Help’ section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- [Separation Anxiety Disorder \(Anxiety\)](#): extreme anxiety that is related to being separated from a primary caregiver, usually in young children [2]
- [Generalized Anxiety Disorder \(Anxiety\)](#): pervasive patterns of worry and anxiety
- [Social Anxiety Disorder \(Anxiety\)](#): anxiety related to feeling incapable in some social settings but not others. Child may avoid birthday parties but feel confident taking a test
- [Depression](#): anxiety that goes untreated for a long time may worsen and lead to depression. Depression should be considered if your child loses pleasure in things he or she enjoyed, makes negative self-statements or appears sad often

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If your child is struggling with a symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his or her learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- [CLEAR Child Psychology](#): to obtain a *customized profile* of concerns for your child or to *consult 'live'* with a psychologist
- [Psychotherapist or Play Therapist](#): to treat anxiety symptoms with cognitive behavioral or play therapy approaches depending on the age and needs of each child
- [School Psychologist](#): to treat anxiety in the school setting; to provide a social group; to look at ways to adjust the setting to lessen anxiety
- [Psychologist or Neuropsychologist](#): to consider a full assessment to look at symptoms in mental health context.



These professionals may recommend or administer the following tests for this symptom:

- [Roberts](#): a projective test of personality and emotional well-being
- [BASC-3](#): a rating scale of feelings and behavior in children
- [Clinical Interview](#): an interview with the child to screen for emotional symptoms
- [RCMAS](#): a self-report rating scale of anxiety symptoms for children
- [CDI-2](#): a self-report rating scale of depression symptoms for children
- [Human Figure Drawing](#): a projective test of personality and emotions
- [Brief Projective Measures](#): a set of short open-ended tests of personality and emotions

In addition, for a more general understanding of your child's profile the following tests may be suggested for attention and intelligence:

- [TOL-II](#): peg board test of executive functions
- [CTMT](#): test of planning and shifting attention
- [TOVA](#): test of attention
- [WISC-V](#): test of cognitive ability

LEARN MORE

[1] Huebner, D. (2005). *What to do when you worry too much: A kid's guide to overcoming anxiety*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/What-When-You-Worry-Much/dp/1591473144/>

[2] Peters, D.B. (2013). *From worrier to warrior: A guide to conquering your fears*. Great Potential Press: Tucson, AZ

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Worrier-Warrior-Guide-Conquering-Fears/dp/1935067249/>

[3] Culbert, Timothy & Kajander, Rebecca. (2007) *Be the Boss of Your Stress (Be The Boss Of Your Body®)*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Be-Boss-Your-Stress-Body/dp/1575422565/>

[4] Foxman (2003). *Recognizing anxiety in children and helping them heal*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Worried-Child-Recognizing-Anxiety-Children/dp/0897934202/>

Books for kids on anxiety:

[5] Meiners, Cheri J. (2003). *When I Feel Afraid (Learning to Get Along)*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/When-Feel-Afraid-Learning-Along/dp/1575421380/>

[6] Green, Andi (2011) *Don't Feed The WorryBug*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Dont-Feed-WorryBug-Soft-Cover/dp/0979286077/>

[7] Freeland PhD, Claire A. B. and Toner PhD, Jacqueline B. (2016). *What to do When You Feel Too Shy: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Social Anxiety*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/What-When-You-Feel-What-/dp/1433822768>

[8] Bender, Janet M (2004). *Tyler Tames the Testing Tiger*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Tyler-Tames-Testing-Tiger-Bender/dp/1931636273/>

[9] Zelinger, Laurie & Zelinger, Jordan (2014). Please explain anxiety to me. <https://www.amazon.com/Explain-Anxiety-Biology-Solutions-Children/dp/1615992162/>

[10] Helsley, Donalisa (2012). The worry glasses: Overcoming anxiety. <https://www.amazon.com/Worry-Glasses-Overcoming-Anxiety/dp/1612251641/>

[11] Cook, Julia (2012). Wilma jean and the worry machine. <https://www.amazon.com/Wilma-Jean-Worry-Machine-Julia/dp/1937870014/>

[12] Cook, Julia (2012) Wilma jean and the worry machine: Activity and idea book. Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Wilma-Jean-Worry-Machine-Activity/dp/1937870030/>

Books for kids on perfectionism:

[13] McCumbee, Stephie (2014). Priscilla & the perfect storm. Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Priscilla-Perfect-Storm-Stephie-McCumbee/dp/1934490601/>

[14] McCumbee, Stephie (2014). Priscilla & the perfect storm activity guide: Classroom ideas for teaching the skills of staying calm and dealing with frustration...
Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Priscilla-Perfect-Storm-Activity-Guide/dp/193449061X/>

[15] Satlzberg, Barney (2010) Beautiful oops! <https://www.amazon.com/Beautiful-Oops-Barney-Saltzberg/dp/076115728X/>

[16] Pett, Mark & Rubinstein, Gary (2011). The girl who never made mistakes. <https://www.amazon.com/Girl-Who-Never-Made-Mistakes/dp/1402255446/>

[17] McDonnell, Patrick (2014). A perfectly messed up story. Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Perfectly-Messed-Up-Story-Patrick-McDonnell/dp/0316222585/>

[18] Mulcahy, William (2016). Zach makes mistakes. <https://www.amazon.com/Zach-Makes-Mistakes-Rules/dp/1631981102/>

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