

# HOW TO HELP YOUR ANXIOUS CHILD OR TEEN

## ANXIETY IN CHILDREN AND TEENS IS COMMON! IT CAN EVEN BE HELPFUL.

For example, a child who is anxious about a test may be motivated to study for it.

### ANXIETY BECOMES A PROBLEM WHEN IT CAUSES SUFFERING AND INTERFERES WITH YOUR CHILD'S FUNCTIONING.

Key signs of possible anxiety disorders in children include:

- Frequent need for reassurance
- Excessive and uncontrollable worry
- Trouble sleeping alone
- Difficulty going to or staying in school



## DOES MY CHILD HAVE AN ANXIETY DISORDER?

YOU MAY WONDER IF YOUR CHILD'S ANXIETY IS TYPICAL OR NOT. HERE ARE **TWO** WAYS TO FIND OUT:

### 1. Think **FISH**<sup>1</sup> to figure out whether your child's anxiety is impairing.

Answer these questions about your child's anxiety:

- **Frequency:** How often does my child get anxious?
- **Intensity/severity:** Is my child's display of anxiety intense or severe? Does my child have meltdowns or tantrums when anxious? Does my child refuse to leave their room due to anxiety?
- **How long:** How long has my child been experiencing a level of anxiety that concerns me or makes my child upset?

For example, if your child experiences episodes of anxiety two or more times a week (frequent) that keep them from going to school or hanging out with friends (intense/severe), and those bouts of anxiety have been going on for more than a month (how long), then you may consider having a professional evaluation. Talk to your pediatrician or mental health professional.

### 2. Complete a screening tool.

You and your child can complete the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED), a 41-item questionnaire. Scan the QR code below to complete the SCARED. Then share a copy with your child's pediatrician.

<sup>1</sup> The acronym FISH was developed by Wendy Silverman, Ph.D.



# HOW CAN I HELP MY ANXIOUS CHILD?

**When your child shares fears and worries, the most effective response has two parts.**

1. Be supportive by listening and expressing your understanding that they are feeling afraid and stressed.
2. Express confidence in their ability to face their fears gradually and strengthen their own courage.

If your child's fears are unrealistic or exaggerated, think carefully before making repeated adjustments to reduce those fears. For example, if your six-year-old is afraid to sleep alone, allowing them to sleep with you every night will only lead to that behavior continuing. Your well-intentioned response will keep your child from learning that they can handle anxiety-provoking situations. You can teach your child ways to cope with anxiety and encourage them to face instead of avoid their fears. Helpful strategies include belly breathing and mindfulness techniques.

## ANXIETY DISORDERS ARE TREATABLE!

**Speak with your child's pediatrician about your concerns.**

The pediatrician may recommend adjustments to sleep, exercise, or nutrition, as well as limits on screen time or social media.

In some cases, the pediatrician may also recommend evidence-based psychotherapy and/or prescription medication.



**What are the treatment options?**

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has the strongest scientific evidence for the treatment of anxiety disorders. CBT can teach your child how to:

- Identify negative thinking patterns and replace them with more effective, positive thoughts and behaviors
- Face the feelings, thoughts, and situations they fear rather than avoiding them

CBT is generally a short-term treatment. Your child can make progress in 10 to 12 sessions.

If your child is experiencing severe anxiety, a combination of CBT plus medication may bring the most rapid and meaningful improvement. A pediatrician or mental health professional with expertise in anxiety can work with you on a treatment plan.

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