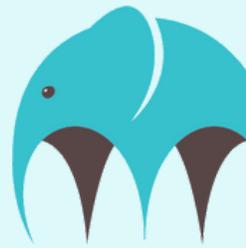


Understanding Anxiety: How to Support Your Child or Youth



Anxiety is a normal part of life that we all experience now and then. When we're feeling anxious, we might be uneasy, worried, or nervous—but most often, these are temporary feelings. However, for some people, anxiety can take over and interfere with normal daily activities. This resource was created to help parents and caregivers understand what anxiety may look like in their child or youth and when they may need to seek out professional support. Additional resources from [School Mental Health Ontario](#) are embedded throughout this toolkit, along with ways for families to connect with their community child and youth mental health services.

What's in this resource?

- What is anxiety?
- How can I support my child or youth with anxiety?
- How can I seek formal support for anxiety?
- Additional resources



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal part of life that we all experience now and then. When we're feeling anxious, we might be uneasy, worried, or nervous—but most often, these are temporary feelings that are associated with specific situations (e.g., going to the dentist) or objects (e.g., seeing equipment used in dental procedures). Anxiety causes certain feelings (e.g., discomfort, apprehension, shortness of breath), which affects how we think (e.g., "Oh no...this dentist is going to use that drill in my mouth and it's going to hurt"), which in turn affects what we do (e.g., feel like we want to cancel our dentist appointment).

Normal anxiety shouldn't be avoided, since it helps us to stay alert to potential dangers—you may have heard of the “fight-or-flight response.” For some people, however, anxiety can take over and cause us to avoid things that are good for us, like social events, being with friends, or trying a new sport (or going to the dentist)!

In children and young people, anxiety is also completely normal and can be brought on by stressful events (e.g., having to take a test) or unknown situations (e.g., starting a new school). Usually, these anxious reactions pass quickly. However, if anxious feelings, thoughts and responses start to interfere with normal daily activities, it may be time to look a bit more deeply at what might be going on.

What does anxiety look like in children and youth?

Anxiety is uncomfortable, and children and young people might not be able to name their feelings in concrete ways. Their anxious feelings may be made more worrisome because they may think something is wrong with them, they might feel self-conscious, or they might experience confusion or shame at some of their behaviours. As their parent or caregiver, being able to recognize anxious feelings and behaviours can help you to help your child or young person manage these experiences. While anxiety can look and feel different for every child and youth, some common signs include:

- **Physical sensations in the body:** e.g., racing heart, headaches, upset stomach, sleep disturbances or nightmares
- **Thoughts:** e.g., constant worry, panic, obsessive thinking, desire to be perfect, feeling of losing control
- **Behaviours:** e.g., avoiding friends and social situations, intense fear of presenting in class, intense fear of making a mistake, test anxiety, angry or explosive outbursts, avoiding school, sleeping too little or too much, difficulty starting or stopping a task

Anxiety is common and usually short-lasting. However, if the above symptoms last over an extended period, overwhelm your child or youth, and/or interfere with their daily activities, it may begin to affect their appetite, sleep, mood, ability to concentrate, ability to relax, and general enjoyment of life. As a parent or caregiver, you may want to seek support to find out if your child or youth is experiencing signs of an anxiety disorder.

What are some common anxiety disorders?

In [younger children](#), anxiety can present itself in a number of ways, including:

- **Specific Phobia.** This involves an extreme fear of an object or situation that isn't life-threatening, like spiders or elevators.
- **Separation Anxiety.** This causes intense feelings of distress when being separated from parents or caregivers.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder.** This causes extreme worries about being in social situations or meeting new people.
- **Selective Mutism.** This causes an inability to speak in certain situations but not in others.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).** This can develop after being involved in or witnessing a traumatic event, causing flashbacks, nightmares, etc.

In [older children and youth](#), anxiety may also present in some additional ways, including:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).** This involves significant worry about what most people usually think of as minor issues, like making a mistake or getting a bad grade.
- **Panic Disorder.** This causes extreme feelings of danger, which is accompanied by shakiness, dizziness, and shortness of breath.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).** This involves ruminating (i.e., going over something again and again in your mind) and then doing something to try and decrease these negative thoughts (e.g., washing hands or counting steps).
- **Eco-Anxiety.** This is a new term recently coined to describe the intense [worries and concerns about climate change](#).

What are some causes of anxiety?

There can be many underlying [causes](#) of an anxiety disorder, so it's important to seek advice and guidance from a professional to better understand its origins in your child or youth. In some cases, children can inherit traits or genes from relatives who also experience anxiety, or they might have certain brain chemistry that causes some of the symptoms of anxiety.

Life situations and the [social determinants of health](#) (particularly poverty and food insecurity, lack of access to education and health services, housing challenges, gender and sexual orientation, race and racism, and social exclusion) can also cause feelings of anxiety and/or contribute to the development of an anxiety disorder.

How can I support my child or youth with anxiety?

As a parent or caregiver, there are many ways you can help your child manage their anxiety-related symptoms. It's important to engage with any professionals who are also working with your child or young person, since together, you form a strong foundation of support for them. Here are some concrete actions you can take.

Listen

Take time to listen to and understand your child or young person's anxiety-related concerns. It's important to do this in a neutral way without implying that their worries are either reasonable or unreasonable. Sometimes, it can be helpful to use resources like the [Feelings Wheel](#) so that your child or young person can put their feelings into words.

PARENT
to **PARENT**

Anxiety is real for your child or youth, even if you can't relate to it. Do not dismiss it.



Encourage the use of tools

When your child's anxiety is low, help them to learn some calming strategies or breathing exercises (e.g., circular breathing) that can be useful to try when they have anxious moments. Practicing these [strategies](#) during non-anxious times can strengthen their "muscle memory" so they can call on them more easily in moments when they're feeling anxious.

PARENT
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Learn grounding skills yourself too so that you can do this with your child or youth to help co-regulate in moments of distress.

Problem-solve together

Remind your child or young person that anxiety is a normal experience and that they are capable of managing it. Work together to explore practical approaches, such as challenging anxious thoughts and replacing them with balanced perspectives or building skills to tolerate distressing thoughts.

You could say, "I understand that you are worried about _____. Tell me more about this worry. Where did you learn about this worry? (i.e., reading a book, watching a movie, etc.) Do you think that is likely to happen? What is our plan if it does happen?" A plan can help them feel validated and less worried that they won't know how to react if their worst fears come true.

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Seek formal support

Earlier, we talked about the value of family doctors, nurse practitioners, and other therapists/counsellors who can provide advice and support in formal ways. In Ontario, children and young people can get help from [community-based services](#) with trained social workers, psychologists, and psychotherapists for specialized consultation and assessment, family caregiver support, counselling and therapy, and more intensive in-home or live-in treatment.

Work with school partners

When a child or young person is struggling, it's natural to want to avoid the thing that creates anxious feelings. While many children find school to be an engaging and enjoyable environment, for some, it can be a source of anxiety, which may cause them to want to stay home. As a parent or caregiver, there are ways you can support your child or young person to [manage these concerns and thrive in school](#).

It can be a good idea to [speak with your child's or youth's educator](#) (or another school team member that you feel comfortable with) to understand how to support them to succeed in school. Schools in Ontario provide assessment, prevention, and early intervention services delivered by mental health professionals that can address anxiety within the school setting.

Visit [School Mental Health Ontario's *By Your Side*](#) resource for more information on school-based supports.



School
Mental Health
Ontario

Santé mentale
en milieu scolaire
Ontario

Help in the moment

When your child or youth is struggling, one of the first things you can do is validate their feelings. Reassure them with phrases like, “Yes, this is hard/challenging/scary. I know you can manage this. I’m going to be with you, and I have your back.” It may be useful to have them repeat an affirmation (e.g., “I can manage these feelings, even if it feels hard right now”).

Engaging in different activities like getting some rest, taking a break from screens or social media, taking a walk, talking with a friend, listening to music, playing a game, being in nature, journaling, or meditating can redirect their thoughts or behaviours, which can reduce anxious feelings. While it’s tempting to support your child or young person to avoid the thing that’s causing them to feel anxious, helping them to gradually confront these situations can reduce anxiety in the long term.

In our family, role-playing and planning ahead for outings or appointments is part of our routine. We talk about what to do if someone needs a break from what is going on, and we have a plan before we go. For example, when we go to the mall, if someone is feeling overwhelmed, we go to the car for a break. I usually want to leave by then, but we have to be open to trying again if they are ready and want to.

PARENT
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Support good habits

Eating a well-balanced diet and avoiding processed foods, getting a good amount of sleep each night, and having a good exercise routine each day are all habits that can help keep feelings of anxiety at bay. Modelling calm behaviour yourself can serve as a powerful example for your child or youth. For more information on supporting your child at home, visit [School Mental Health Ontario](https://www.schmho.org).

Don’t overshare your adult worries with your child or youth. Be mindful of their presence when you’re talking about things like money worries, job worries, politics, or relationship issues. Talking about some adult topics can be okay as your children move into adolescence and are working toward independence, but it’s important to make sure that conversations are age-appropriate.

PARENT
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Create a coping kit

Putting together several things that can help decrease anxiety can be a good way of accessing reliable comfort quickly when a child or young person is feeling anxious. Including photographs of places or people that the child or young person loves, sensory items, and other calming items can help soothe them when anxious feelings surface.

We have a coping kit that is portable, and we also keep a few others around so there are options (one in the car, one at home, one for their backpack). It might include fidgets, colouring activities, a special stuffed toy, or anything else that helps your child regulate. We check in on how it's working every once in a while and change up the items as needed.

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Know when to ask for help

We talked about [accessing help](#) from professionals, but close friends and family members can also provide valuable help as necessary. Encourage them to get involved in your life and help support the whole family through difficult times.

I had a friend whom I could call to come and pick up my younger son so that I could focus on supporting my son with anxiety when he was having a panic attack or couldn't calm himself. It helped me to know that I could count on one or two people to help my family because I was a single parent at the time and needed that support.

PARENT
to PARENT

Take care of yourself

[Looking after your own physical and mental health](#) can help you stay grounded and able to support your child or young person. Staying calm can help your child or youth stay calm, which is helpful when trying to keep anxious feelings contained.

How can I seek formal support for anxiety?

How do I know when to seek formal support for my child or youth?

As a parent or caregiver, it's hard to see your child or young person struggle. In general, it's a good idea to seek professional help for your child or youth if their anxious symptoms or signs:

- Persist over a lengthy period of time
- Increase or intensify over time
- Negatively impact their daily activities or functioning at home, school or in the broader community and prevent them from going to school, extracurricular pursuits or seeing friends
- Disrupt your family routine (e.g., their challenges interfere with the family's ability to enjoy day-to-day activities and routines, sleep patterns, appetite, etc.)

Often, the first step is connecting with a family doctor or nurse practitioner. Sometimes mental health symptoms can show up as a physical illness, and a medical professional can determine what kind of intervention might work best for your child or young person. If your family doctor or nurse practitioner thinks that a mental health issue may be involved, they can help connect you with someone who supports these concerns in children and youth specifically (e.g., a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or counsellor).



In Ontario, you and/or your child or youth can call [One Stop Talk](#). One Stop Talk offers children and youth under the age of 18 a free, one-hour, confidential therapy session in their preferred language and can help connect them to community-based services if additional support is needed.

What if my child or youth receives a formal diagnosis?

Once a qualified professional walks your child or young person through a formal assessment to understand their strengths and needs, they may offer a formal diagnosis of anxiety or an anxiety-related disorder.

Medication may help manage your child or young person's symptoms. Another option is counselling or therapy, which typically occurs with a trained professional (like a social worker, psychotherapist or psychiatrist).

There are a range of different approaches that they might try (for example, you may have heard of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy ([CBT](#)) or Dialectical Behaviour Therapy ([DBT](#))). Whether medication and/or therapy are part of your child or young person's plan of care, it may take a few attempts to land on an approach that works best for them.

Additional Resources

- [Anxiety Canada](#)
- [Kids Help Phone – How to Manage Anxiety and Panic](#)
- [Kelty Mental Health – Anxiety](#)
- [Caring for Kids – Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders](#)
- [Sickkids – Anxiety](#)
- [About Kids Health – Teens – Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders](#)
- [School Mental Health Ontario – Navigating Childhood Anxiety](#)
- [Foundry – Anxiety](#)
- [CHEO – Anxiety and Stress Management](#)
- [How to Deal with News Anxiety](#)

You don't have to do this alone.

If you are a parent or caregiver worried about your child, or a young person looking for help yourself, please use our Find Help tool to connect with a service provider near you. Our network of child and youth mental health centres has 4,000 professionals ready to help children, youth, and families with free counselling and treatment. Our agencies provide care in person, on the phone, and virtually. No problem is too big or small.

[Find your closest child and youth mental health centre.](#)