

Childhood Stress and Anxiety Can Be Eased

Tips for Helping Children Cope

Clearwater, FL; June 16, 2008 – Today, children and adolescents are required to manage increasing amounts of stress. Between pressures at school, hectic schedules full with various after-school commitments and coping with adult situations, children are commonly experiencing intense feelings of anxiety. Parental awareness of the symptoms and treatment strategies are valuable when helping children cope with anxiety.

April Lott, LCSW, Director of Community Treatment Programs at Directions for Mental Health in Clearwater, suggests that parents play an active role in recognizing and managing their children when dealing with any anxiety disorders. She points out, “the biggest mistake that parents make is minimizing anxiety and talking kids out of their feelings”. Lott continues to explain that “anxiety for kids is real” and that left unchecked, the child risks “poor grades, poor school performance, and later in adolescence and adulthood it could lead to substance abuse”.

The United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration estimates that 13 in 100 children and adolescents ages 9-17 experience some form of anxiety. Anxiety disorders manifest themselves as test anxiety, separation anxiety, social anxiety, specific phobias (certain animals, heights, the weather, the dark, etc.), and as generalized anxieties about performance in sports and/or school and family issues.

Specific age groups are predisposed to particular types of anxiety. Lott explains, children ages 6 to 9 are most likely to experience separation anxiety and develop specific phobias. Generalized anxiety regarding performance, family and peer relationships, and comparison to peers are prevalent in the 9 to 11 age group. Young adults, ages 11-17, are most likely to develop forms of social anxiety as they begin creating and maintaining relationships with peers on their own.

No child is immune to experiencing feelings of anxiety. Lott suggests that parents learn how to identify the key symptoms and signs associated with anxiety. A child suffering with anxiety may experience distinct changes in their sleeping pattern and/or withdrawal from social activities and become isolated. Parents who observe these changes, or other abnormal behavior, should refer to the following advice.

Ask them what is going on. Parents should attempt to communicate openly about recent events in their child’s life. If the child is unwilling to talk, the parent should continue to probe further by commenting on recent behavior changes.

Lott suggests, “I have noticed you have been sleeping much more, is everything ok?”

Listen to their response. Once a child has shared their feelings, parents should take special care not to belittle their feelings by using phrases like, “it’s not a big deal” or “you’ll get over this”. Parents should not attempt to talk their child out of their feelings by replying, “it’s silly you feel that way,” or something similar. Additionally, parents should never place the blame on their child by implying that their actions are the reason for the anxiety.

Sometimes, parents may not be able to provide their child with the amount of help needed to address their specific anxiety issues. Then, it becomes necessary to seek professional help to ensure that the issues are properly managed and treated. However, most children only need someone to “validate their experience, by listening to them, and offer effective coping strategies in order to effectively handle their anxieties” according to Lott.

About Directions for Mental Health, Inc.

Directions for Mental Health, Inc., established in 1982, is a non-profit organization committed to helping heal the hurt in the lives of thousands of Pinellas County residents suffering from—or at risk of—mental illness. With nationally accredited programs, Directions sets the standard for best practices in mental health treatment, while making mental health care affordable and accessible to individuals and families, and building a safer, healthier community. Serving more than 8,000 people per year, Directions is dedicated to developing innovative programs that change lives, while reducing crime, homelessness, drug abuse and child abuse.

For questions about mental illness and programs, visit Directions for Mental Health’s website at www.directionsmh.org or call (727) 524-4464 extension 1700.

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