

Parenting in an Age of Anxiety: What You Need to Know

Dr Jodi Richardson; B.Ed., B.App.Sci (Hons), PhD (Medicine)

Families all over Australia are asking the same question: Is the anxiety my child or teen is experiencing a problem? It's an important question to ask, and one I've asked in my own home too. However, it's not a question easily answered without understanding what anxiety is, why it feels the way it does, and how to tell the difference between normal anxiety and anxiety that's becoming a problem. The article will help equip you to better understand what's happening and if your child or teen needs extra help.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a common feeling of unease about potential future events. In children and teens, anxiety might bubble up when waiting for their turn to speak in front of the class, anticipating an upcoming school camp, or trying something new. Typically, anxiety increases as the anticipated challenge draws near and fades once it has passed. But, for some kids, anxiety can be more frequent and intense. Excessive and ongoing fears and worries can get in the way of them joining in everyday activities like going to school, spending time with friends, joining in extracurricular activities, or embracing new experiences.

Why Does it Feel so Awful?

When the alarm in our brain detects a potential 'threat' (e.g. auditioning for a leadership position), our body is powered up to fight the threat or run away (Fight or Flight). This process causes changes in heart rate, breathing rate, blood flow, digestion, vision, body temperature, and more. These physical reactions can feel uncomfortable and even overwhelming. Whether the threat is genuine danger or a safe but challenging situation, the body and brain respond similarly. Strong emotions can come with anxiety too.

It Makes Sense that Kids and Teens Don't Like This Feeling

Many children and teens find these sensations in response to a potential threat distressing. They often want the feelings to stop and many end up avoiding situations where these feelings arise, even though most of these situations are perfectly safe. When kids and teens avoid whatever is causing them to feel anxious, over time, the anxiety builds to be more of a problem, not less. Educating children and teens about anxiety, and why it feels the way it does, empowers them to understand these sensations better. This understanding helps them to notice and name how they feel, recognise that the anxiety causing situation is actually safe, and be less likely to use avoidance as a coping strategy.

When Do Children or Teens Need Extra Help?

Keep in mind that normal anxiety rises and falls with the coming and going of stressful situations. It's important to keep an eye on the duration and intensity of your child or teen's anxiety, and how it's affecting their day-to-day life. Pay attention to whether or not their anxiety:

- Persists for an extended period, lasting weeks or months
- Seems disproportionate to the situation or triggers
- Is interfering with daily life

If you notice that anxiety is starting to impact your child's daily life or your family's routines, seeking help is crucial. The earlier the better. Start by making an appointment with your family doctor for guidance, support and additional support as needed.

Supporting Your Child/Teen at Home

Our role as parents is to provide a nurturing environment where our children feel safe expressing their emotions. Responding to their challenging emotions with empathy and understanding is incredibly impactful. It's important to carve out time to have open conversations, actively listen and validate their feelings. Embracing the mindset "all feelings are welcome" can foster a supportive family dynamic. It's equally important we support our kids to do what's important even when anxiety shows up. Avoidance is an unhelpful coping strategy that escalates anxiety over time.

Need More Help?

Go to <https://drjodirichardson.com/> for supporting resources.

Tune into parenting anxious kids and teens episodes on the podcast:

['Well, hello anxiety' with Dr Jodi Richardson](#)