

## CHILDHOOD WORRY AND ANXIETY

### OVERVIEW: WHAT, HOW OFTEN, AND WHY:

- Anxiety is a group of physical sensations, types of thinking, feelings and actions which occur when we are feeling unsure, vulnerable, or unsafe.

#### Physical sensations:

- Stomach aches and headaches
- Tiredness
- Sweating
- Fast breathing/heart rate
- Sleeping problems
- Physically restless

#### Feelings and types of thinking:

- Worry, fear, nervousness
- Racing thoughts
- Feeling 'stuck'
- Wandering or distracted thinking

#### Behaviours and actions:

- Avoidance
- Act irritably – yelling, defiance, aggression
- Withdrawing from people
- Talking about worries
- Asking for reassurance

### WHAT ARE THE TOPICS WHICH ARE THE FOCUS OF ANXIETY OR WORRY FOR CHILDREN?

- Being apart from parents/caregivers
- Getting hurt, sick or dying – themselves or people (or animals) they care about
- Animals (dogs, snakes, etc.)
- Imaginary creatures (monsters, vampires, other media inspired issues)
- Study/school issues
- Germs/other health topics
- Toileting/eating topics
- How others think of them
- Whether they are "good enough"
- Body image or physical appearance
- World or broader society issues (poverty, the environment)
- Sometimes children cannot identify a "specific topic" they are anxious or worried about – and instead, their anxiety shows through physical sensations or behaviours.

### PROBLEM ANXIETY IN CHILDREN:

- Anxiety can be **mild** - a child might have a tendency to worry slightly more than average.
- Anxiety can be **very severe** – a child might have all parts of their life impacted on or restricted by anxiety.
- When anxiety is severe and impacts a child's life – they will often be diagnosed with an **anxiety disorder**.
  - Separation anxiety: Occurs when a child is separated from parent/caregiver
  - Social Anxiety
  - Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
  - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
  - Phobias

### HOW MANY CHILDREN EXPERIENCE ANXIETY?

- 70% of children report having at least one personal worry.
- Approximately 6% of children meet criteria for an anxiety disorder.
- 1 in 4 parents report that they believed their child needed support for an emotional or psychological "challenge" in the last 12 months.
- Teachers report providing informal or formal emotional health support for 20% of the children in their class.

## WHY DO KIDS EXPERIENCE ANXIETY?

### 1. They are human.

- Some experience of anxiety and worry is normal.
- The older and more capable kids get, the more *likely they are to experience at least some level of anxiety*.

### 2. Their environment.

- What happens in a child's life can contribute to anxiety:
  - Experiencing social and peer group challenges
  - Hardships and challenges at home with families
  - Difficulties with illness and disability
  - Traumatic events and circumstances
  - Learning or school problems
  - Parenting styles and actions
  - Grief and loss
  - Sleeping problems
  - Media and technology influences
  - Nutrition/medication

### 3. Their styles of thinking and behaving.

- Anxious children think and act in slightly different ways to other children.
- Children who are anxious are more likely to:
  - Interpret "ambiguous" situations as dangerous and scary
  - Look for information which confirms problems or worries
  - Have very high standards for their behaviour and the behaviour of others
  - Avoid situations which seem worrying
  - Good at thinking about abstract concepts
  - Be more imaginative and creative

### 4. Their "biology".

- The physiological systems in our body contribute to anxiety.
  - Genetic factor research
  - Brain/body differences research
  - Infant behaviour research

## THE GOOD NEWS:

- Children who worry can learn to manage their worry and anxiety.
- Children with anxiety disorders often recover.
- Parents/caregivers can help.