

What does anxiety look like?

When will Sara stop worrying?

Ten-year-old Sara is hard to get to school in the mornings. She seems happy all weekend until Sunday night arrives. On school days, it's hard to get her out of bed. When she finally does get up, she takes ages to get dressed. She often complains to her mum that she feels sick. She says 20 times, "When are you picking me up from school?"

Sara usually does her homework without any fuss. Often she takes extra time to make sure it is just right. Lately Sara has not been paying attention in school and has been telling her teacher she feels sick and wants to go home.

At night Sara won't go to bed by herself. She says she's scared of burglars. She won't go on sleepovers to her friends' houses either. Her father thinks it's just a passing phase, but her mother is concerned.

Does Sara have a difficulty with anxiety?

She may have, so further investigation would be a good idea. Anxious children tend to see the world as a dangerous place. They fear getting hurt, either physically or socially. They can feel anxious even when there is no actual danger. The way children deal with their anxiety can make it worse. If children keep on avoiding the things that make them anxious they don't learn helpful ways to cope and their anxiety may keep growing. Everyone gets anxious in certain situations. In children, fears and worries are not unusual. If anxiety is extreme, it can stop children learning well, joining in with others and enjoying life.

What you might see in a child with anxiety difficulties

A child with anxiety difficulties may...

- seek reassurance often
- avoid situations they feel worried or scared about
- try to get others to do the things they are worried about
- tell you they have physical pains
- dislike taking risks or trying new things
- have lots of fears
- get upset easily
- have lots of worries.

Parents and carers might notice their child...

- clings to them
- asks for help with things they can do for themselves
- doesn't want to get ready for school
- won't go to sleep without a parent or carer
- asks, "will you do it for me?" a lot
- asks, "will you tell them for me?"
- often complains of stomach pains or headaches
- worries a lot about doing things right
- prefers to watch others rather than have a go
- is scared of the dark, dogs, injections, being alone, germs, tests
- often cries over small things
- complains, "he's teasing me," a lot
- always sees the dangerous side of everything.

Teach children helpful self-talk. Instead of saying to themselves, "I can't do this," encourage them to say, "I'll give it a go."

How parents and carers can help

Children with anxiety difficulties tend to lack confidence in their abilities and feel overwhelmed easily. They need to learn how to cope with worries and build confidence. Children with these difficulties benefit from parents and carers providing positive support and teaching them the emotional and thinking skills that can help them manage their worries.

Parents and carers can

- Teach children to be brave by showing them you believe they can do things and encouraging them to have a go even when they are scared or worried. You might remind them of a time when they were brave and it worked.
- Break larger goals into small steps that children can succeed with, and praise their success.
- Help them learn relaxation skills. Breathing slowly to calm down and imagining yourself coping in a scary situation are really helpful ways of managing anxiety. Doing it with them is a fun way to start.
- Teach children helpful self-talk. Instead of saying to themselves, "I can't do this," encourage them to say, "I'll give it a go." Help them to see that by worrying less they can do more and feel better about themselves.

Are you worried that your child is a bit like Sara?

Here's how to get help

- Talk with your child's classroom teacher about how your child is managing at school and find out what resources the school can offer.
- Ask to speak to the school psychologist or counsellor.
- Talk to your doctor about the possibility of an assessment and referral to a children's mental health specialist.

A mental health professional may diagnose an anxiety disorder when

- 1 a child gets anxious more easily and more often than other children of the same age
- 2 anxiety affects a child in lots of settings – at home, at school and in their community
- 3 the difficulties with anxiety greatly interfere with a child's ability to get on at home, school and with friends
- 4 the fears and worries seem to be out of proportion to the risks in a child's life.

For more, please refer to the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on recognising and getting help for children with mental health difficulties.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

