

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## KIDS AND ANXIETY: WHEN IT'S MORE THAN JUST "JITTERS"

### Is my child anxious?

Does your child worry too much about being away from you, going to school, friendships, or future events? Does your child repeatedly ask "What if...?" Are you constantly trying to soothe and reassure your child? Does your child report feeling isolated and lonely or appear tearful? Are your child's day-to-day activities disrupted because he or she is always worried about what can go wrong?

If you answered yes to the above questions, your child may be experiencing excessive anxiety. Other signs of excessive anxiety include physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, cold and clammy hands, rapid heartbeat, faint feelings, sleepless nights, and a general feeling of tension.

### What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a basic emotion experienced by all human beings. Anxiety usually occurs as a normal response to danger or threat. Although everyone experiences anxiety to different degrees and at different times in response to stress, problematic anxiety is something that develops and gets worse with time. As children grow up, there are times when they become scared or sense danger. For most children, things such as being scared in the dark, thinking about monsters, or worrying about falling off a bike, provide initial experiences with feeling anxious. For other children, these feelings happen during social and evaluative situations such as taking tests, meeting other kids, or maybe being teased.

It is completely natural to have anxious feelings in response to certain situations and at certain ages. Most children learn over time that there are no monsters, studying will help to pass tests, and how to respond to teasing. However, for some children, anxious feelings are particularly strong or happen very often and this becomes overwhelming. Rather than learn to manage the anxiety and move forward, these children give in to the anxiety and feel worse. Fortunately, children can learn how to develop new feelings, new thoughts, and new ways of coping in response to anxiety provoking situations. *Anxiety is highly treatable. Upwards of 90% of individuals treated for anxiety disorders recover fully.*

### What does anxiety look like in children?

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health issues affecting youth. Anxiety can take many forms, including *Separation Anxiety Disorder*, *Social Phobia*, and *Generalized Anxiety Disorder*.

- *Separation Anxiety Disorder*: Anxiousness over separation from familiar people and situations is a normal part of growing up. However, this anxiety should ease as a child grows older. A child or adolescent who experiences excessive anxiety on routine separation from parents, caregivers, home, or other familiar situations may be suffering from separation anxiety disorder. Common markers include crying, clinging, or panic when faced with separation, excessive worrying about harm to loved ones or fear that they will not return home, reluctance to sleep alone, and for some children, refusal to attend school.
- *Social Phobia*: As children develop, they are expected to interact socially with peers and adults. However, some children experience anxiety when facing certain social situations. They may have difficulty speaking up in class, starting or joining a conversation, making and keeping friends, answering or speaking on the telephone, giving oral reports, taking exams, eating in public, being assertive, or taking part in performance-based activities like gym or music. These children often worry too much about what other people think and are overly concerned about doing or saying something embarrassing. They report considerable anxiety and avoidance of these situations due to fears of looking foolish, being rejected or being evaluated negatively. When such anxiety and avoidance begins to cause significant distress and interferes with their daily functioning, it may be considered social phobia.

- ❑ *Generalized Anxiety Disorder*: Children and teenagers with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) worry about all sorts of things such as school performance, health matters, world events, and family issues. Although some amount of worry is natural for any child going through school and everyday life, the child with GAD can't stop worrying, no matter how much reassurance is given to him or her. Youth with GAD also tend to have symptoms such as irritability, sleep disturbance, and muscle aches or pains due to their worry.

### **What can I do to help my child?**

- ❑ Although it may be tempting to help your child avoid or escape anxious situations and activities, doing so only serves to perpetuate their anxiety. Instead of rescuing, encourage your child to work through his or her fears and praise any effort aimed at coping.
- ❑ Children model the behaviors and emotions expressed by their parents. They will look to you for clues on how to respond in a given situation. Monitor and manage your own reactions to anxiety provoking situations as well as your response to your child's expressed anxiety.
- ❑ Children are anxious partly because of what they are telling themselves. You can help your child see that his or her thoughts may be interfering with performance. For example, a child may not want to do something because they are concerned that "other kids will think I'm stupid." You can help your child by gently challenging such thoughts. For example, ask, "How can you know what someone else is thinking unless you ask them?" You can encourage your child to create a more rational and neutral thought to replace the negative, automatic ones. For example, your child can instead say to himself/herself "I can't read people's minds. I can't know what anyone else thinks unless they tell me".

### **When should I seek professional help?**

It is normal for children to experience anxiety from time to time. If your child's anxiety becomes excessive and starts to interfere with how he or she is doing at school or with friends and family, then you might want to seek professional help. Research indicates that cognitive-behavioral interventions for anxious children are very successful.

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### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms. Comprehensive services to treat Anxiety Disorders in youth, including diagnostic evaluations, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and medication management programs are available. Children, adolescents and young adults through age 30 are eligible. Additional programs are provided for preschool and kindergarten age children, as well as for parents of anxious children.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212)263-8916. Clinical research studies evaluating treatments for anxiety disorders are currently available. Youth between the ages of 7 and 17 who are experiencing separation anxiety disorder, social phobia, or generalized anxiety disorder may be eligible to participate in a clinical trial sponsored by the National Institutes of Mental Health. For more information, call (212) 263-7779.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-2479.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health  
NYU Child Study Center**

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