

Anxiety disorders in children

It's normal for children to feel worried or anxious from time to time. For example, when they're starting school or nursery, or moving to a new area.

But for some children, anxiety affects their behaviour and thoughts every day. It can interfere with their school, home and social life.

This is when you may need professional help to tackle it.

Symptoms of anxiety in children

Signs to look out for in your child are:

- always worrying or having negative thoughts
- finding it hard to concentrate
- not sleeping, or waking in the night with bad dreams
- not eating properly
- quickly getting angry or irritable, and being out of control during outbursts
- feeling tense and fidgety
- using the toilet very often
- always crying
- being clingy
- complaining of tummy aches and feeling unwell

[Separation anxiety](#) is common in younger children.

Older children and teenagers tend to worry more about school or have social anxiety.

How to help your anxious child

If your child is having problems with anxiety, there are things you can do to help.

Above all, it's important to listen to your child about their anxieties or worries.

Your instinct may be to tell them 'do not worry, it will never happen.' But reassurance is not always the best strategy. Most of the things children worry about are possible, even if some of them seem unlikely.

Try to validate them by telling them you can see why they are worried. Tell them there are ways to manage worry and deal with the things they fear.

Get professional help if your child is always anxious and:

- it's not getting better or is getting worse
- self-help is not working
- it's affecting their school or family life, or their friendships

Where to get help for anxiety

An appointment with your GP is a good place to start.

Talk to the GP on your own or with your child. Your child could speak to the GP without you being in the room, if you give your consent and they feel comfortable doing so.

Early intervention for anxiety is helpful. This includes self-help books and parental education about managing anxiety in children. For mild levels of anxiety your GP may refer you to the local primary care psychology service, or you can call the service yourself.

Your child may also be referred to the local [child and adolescent mental health service \(CAMHS\)](#). CAMHS can help if your child has not benefited from early intervention, or has moderate to severe levels of anxiety.

If your child does not want to see a doctor, they may be able to get help from a local youth counselling service.

[Find out more about youth counselling services on the Daughters of Charity website](#)

Young people age 12 to 25 can get mental health support from Jigsaw, online or in person if available in your area.

[Find out more on the Jigsaw website](#)

Treatments for anxiety disorders in children

The type of treatment offered will depend on your child's age and the cause of their anxiety. All of the following treatments are offered by the HSE.

Counselling

Counselling can help your child understand what's making them anxious. It can allow them to work through the situation.

Cognitive behavioural therapy

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) helps your child manage problems by thinking in a more balanced way. It can help them identify and control unhelpful patterns of behaviour.

Anxiety medicines

Anxiety medicines may be offered to your child if their anxiety is severe, or if talking therapies are not working. These medicines are prescribed by psychiatrists who specialise in child and adolescent mental health.

What causes anxiety disorders in children

Some children are born more anxious and less able to cope with stress than others.

Children can develop anxious thoughts and avoidant behaviours by imitating ways other people manage and deal with anxiety.

In many cases the anxiety and avoidant behaviours of children continue when they have:

- managed to avoid a stressful situation
- felt relief about avoiding it

The child is then more likely to avoid that situation again.

Some children develop anxiety after stressful events, such as:

- moving house or school often
- parents fighting or arguing
- the death of a close relative or friend
- becoming seriously ill or getting injured in an accident
- school-related issues like exams or bullying
- being abused or neglected

Children who experience severe anxiety can also experience other mental health difficulties. Depression is the most common.

[Find out more about depression](#)

Get support

[Organisations that provide mental health services](#)

Content supplied by the [NHS](#) and adapted for Ireland by the HSE

Page last reviewed: 1 September 2022

Next review due: 1 September 2025

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