

insights



Four reasons why your child or teen may be anxious

by Michael Grose

Increasingly, Australian children and teenagers are experiencing anxiety at levels that are affecting their mental health, school achievement and happiness. As a loving parent you naturally want to prevent your child or young person from being overwhelmed by anxiety.

There are four main reasons your child may be experiencing anxiety.

1. You are passing your anxiety and stress on to your child

Anxiety is a function of groups – it rarely happens in isolation. Many parents I meet in my work are stressed by their lives and fearful for their children. The contagious nature of anxiety means that parents often pass their stresses, worries and fears on to their children. Legendary psychologist Martin Seligman found through his research that children have a significant propensity to copy their primary parents' explanatory style by eight years of age. If parents see events through the frame of stress, anxiety and fear then they are passing this same frame on to their children.

2. Your child is overloaded

Few would argue that an active child is a healthy child. However it seems that we now have too much of a good thing as Australian kids have a smorgasbord of organised pre-school and after-school activities to keep their minds and bodies active. Many of these activities have a high performance element attached (get that badge, win that game, attain that level) so that kids are always striving or attaining. The pressure to perform is always there. Activity overload is a particular problem for achievement-driven, anxious types of kids – classic first-born child characteristics.



3. Your child doesn't play enough

Play is the release valve for the pressures of a high performance, serious life. It's the way kids have always relaxed and let off steam. The best type of play for relaxing and letting off steam is generally physical play that takes place outside. Your child may play a great deal on a digital device, but this activity stimulates the brain rather than rejuvenates it.

Organised sport doesn't fit the play category if it adds to their anxiety rather than releases it. Kids need to be involved in play that's fun, rejuvenating and enjoyable. They need to look forward to it rather than fear it.

4. Your child focuses too much on the future

Some children are born to worry. They fret about seemingly simple activities such as starting a new school term, going to a birthday party or who's picking them up from school at the end of the day. Worriers are future oriented, anxious about things that haven't happened yet. These type-A anxious types don't know how to stay in the present. Their minds constantly wander ahead to what may happen. They benefit from learning relaxation techniques such as mindfulness and deep breathing that anchor them to the present, temporarily releasing them from their worries and anxieties. When kids learn these techniques from a young age or even during adolescence they are likely to become hard-wired for life.



There is so much we can do to equip children with the tools they need to manage their anxiousness and worries, and to prevent these from accelerating into full blown, debilitating anxiety. We can start by looking at our own lifestyles and make changes that may alleviate the stresses that inevitably trickle down to our kids. We can also take a look at our kid's lifestyles and activities and make sure they contain a healthy balance between high performance and fun. Most importantly, we can provide kids with the tools and skills to recognise, manage and cope with anxiousness so that they have autonomy over their own mental health and wellbeing, both now and into the future.



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