

Anxiety in Children

Anxiety is a hot topic these days, as it is a mental health condition that can be debilitating. Dr. Paul Foxman is currently considered to be one of the world's leading experts on Anxiety. In student services, we are often approached regarding this topic. When a child cannot function to the point where quality of life is compromised and daily activities (such as coming to school) are practically impossible, professional help is required. However, a lot of children do have feelings of anxiety and required some sort of support. There are things that parents can do in order to help a child deal with worries that may not have crossed quite into a danger zone yet. Children with anxiety aren't necessarily able at a young age to come out and simply state, "I'm anxious". Anxiety can mask itself through defiance, opposition, aggression and attention issues.

Foxman, on the same lines as Neufeld and Sax, recommends that a child get enough sleep, eat healthy foods, and exercise. These are natural and easy ways to reduce stress. He also places great importance on the family meal and how it can seem to "protect" against anxiety. Foxman, like our other two experts, is concerned about overscheduling and feels that being on the go constantly can be harmful.

Foxman discusses in his book though "stressors" (something that causes one to feel stressed) that can affect children. According to Foxman, the death of a parent and divorce are the greatest stressors a child can face. He says we should not underestimate the power of these life events. Yet, there are others that may seem harmless enough to us and yet can be troubling for children. These include the birth of a new baby, a move to a new house, a new school, and even a birthday party. Each stressor merits a certain point value. So, if you move to a new house, that alone shouldn't cause a child to end up with a type of severe anxiety (but keep in mind this may result in a few difficult weeks as you make the adjustment). However, we all have difficult years and life goes in peaks and valleys. Let's say one year you get divorced, move to a new house, have a grandparent who is suddenly diagnosed with cancer and your child has to move to a new school. Now the child is dealing with many factors at once. If you notice a great change in your child's behaviour, ask yourself if there's been a lot of changes (again, some may not be a big deal in their own right but in combination with others create the cumulative effect). We would encourage everyone to look at Foxman's list of stressors.

Many parents talk about having children who are perfectionists. This type of child can be exhausting. There are ways to deal with this situation.

One fantastic technique is to teach your child to strive towards excellence, rather than perfection. Getting A+'s in all subjects may not be realistic but striving towards, say, mainly A's with some B's is a happier plan.

He also talks in life about the "fudge factor". Do you know the feeling when you have five big things you're trying to accomplish in a day and you're really on a roll? Then all of a sudden, something comes out of nowhere (like a child who announces they threw up) and now you've

only gotten four things done. You feel stressed and annoyed that you weren't able to get it all done. Foxman says that we should always in our day allow for the unknown or fudge factor. With that example in mind, instead of trying to get five things done, aim for four and accept that something is probably going to get in the way that day.

Foxman also suggests trying to look at the positive in each situation. Let's say your child has entered the Manitoba Marathon for the first time and has a goal of completing the half-marathon event in 2 hours. Race day comes and they end up with a time of 2 hours and three minutes. Instead of letting him or her dwell on the fact that they didn't meet their goal, look at what went well. You might say something like, "This was your first race and you completed it on a hot day when many dropped out. You took on a new distance and enjoyed your training. You made a new friend in your running group. You even learned that next time, you need to stop for water more often so you don't become dehydrated".

Finally, don't allow children to "over-catastrophize". We all know the person who is convinced they failed a big test. They go on at length and talk about it constantly. Then they get the results back and it turns out they got a B+. If your child looks at the negative, it's okay to say something like, "You could fail" (and acknowledge that this is a possibility) but add in "What's probably going to happen though?" With the test example, you might say, "You've been getting A's and B's all term. You studied and asked questions. And you said you were able to complete the majority of the questions before the time was up".

This is a particularly difficult topic to sum up into one entry. If there is more interest on this topic, please contact either Mme Reynolds or Mme Managire and we can continue to address this topic. This really only scratches the surface of this issue!