

## **Children and Anxiety**

Is your child a worrier and at times filled with fear and anxiety? Such feelings in kids are not only normal, they are necessary. Dealing with anxieties helps to prepare young people to handle the inevitable unsettling experiences and challenging situations in life.

Some signs that a child may be anxious about something may include:

- becoming clingy, impulsive, or distracted
- nervous movements, such as temporary twitches
- problems getting to sleep and/or staying asleep longer than usual
- refusing to participate in age appropriate activities
- sweaty hands
- accelerated heart rate and breathing
- nausea
- headaches
- stomachaches

You can help your child develop the skills and confidence to deal with fears and anxieties:

- Acknowledge your child's fear - don't dismiss it or ignore it. "I can see you are feeling ...."
- Talk about the fears — talking can take some of the power out of the negative feeling.
- Never belittle the fear as a way of forcing your child to overcome it. Saying, "Don't be ridiculous! There are no lions in the hallway," may get your child to go to bed, but it won't make the fear go away.
- Don't cater to fears. If your child doesn't like dogs, don't cross the street deliberately to avoid one. This will just reinforce that dogs should be feared and avoided. Provide support and gentle words as you approach the feared object or situation with your child.
- Teaching your child to rate their fear on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the strongest, may help him/her to "see" the fear as less intense than first imagined. Talk about how they think they could get the fear down from a 9 to a 7 for instance. Younger kids can think about how "full of fear" they are, with being full "up to my knees" as not so scared, "up to my stomach" as more frightened, and "up to my head" as truly petrified.
- Reward efforts to overcome fear/worry. Comment when your child has made an effort to address the fear/worry.
- Teach coping strategies. Encourage your child to venture out toward the feared object, and then return to you for safety before venturing out again. The child can also learn some positive self-statements, such as "I can do this" and "I will be OK" to say to himself or herself when feeling anxious. Relaxation techniques are helpful, including visualization (floating on a cloud or lying on a beach, for example) and deep breathing (imagining that the lungs are balloons and letting them slowly deflate or holding an imaginary flower and smelling it).

The key to resolving fears and anxieties is to overcome them or at least sit comfortably with them, and in working together you can help your child better cope with life's situations.