

## **The Anxiety Demon In Littleton**

*Rescuing our young people from a demon that has the power to set the course for the rest of their lives.*

By Faust Ruggiero

Childhood anxiety disorders are very common, affecting one in eight children. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates a lifetime prevalence between the ages thirteen and eighteen years of 25.1%, and a lifetime prevalence of 5.9% for "severe" anxiety disorder. However, the effects of anxiety can be seen in children as early as age six. Some estimates place anxiety in the age ranges of three to six at almost ten percent. The truth of the matter is that we have spent so few of our resources attempting to diagnose and treat childhood anxiety, that we really don't know what the real statistics are.

Even in adult populations, the figures are usually low, since they represent people who have sought treatment for the disorder. Children, to make matters more difficult, unlike adults, are less verbal about their symptoms. This has to do with their early developmental stages, a realistic lack of understanding about stressors and other triggers for anxiety, and also, their limited ability to explain what they are feeling.

In addition, it's difficult for parents to understand that their child may be suffering from anxiety. Parents have a tendency to downplay the symptoms, especially since children are expressing complaints that are difficult to understand, and seemed to have no viable solution. Parents have a tendency to either avoid the symptoms, not gain enough understanding of what their children are feeling to treat the symptoms, and in other cases, are dealing with their own anxiety or life concerns, and can't spend an adequate amount of time to understand what their children are experiencing.

### **What are the signs of anxiety in children?**

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. Try to pay attention to the warning signs. You may notice that they:

- Have somatic complaints, i.e., stomach aches, headaches, and other generalized discomforts
- Spend more time alone
- Find it hard to concentrate
- Become irritable, tearful, or clingy
- Have sleeping difficulty, or wake up in the night with bad dreams
- May start wetting the bed
- Are not eating properly
- Quickly get angry or irritable, and can seem to be out of control during outbursts
- Constantly worrying or having negative thoughts
- Are fearful, but they have a difficult time defining their fear
- Feel tense and fidgety, or are using the toilet often
- Often cry
- Express concerns that don't seem to have an explanation, or a solution

**In older children you may notice that they:**

- ◆ Lack confidence to try new things, or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- ◆ Find it hard to concentrate
- ◆ Have problems with sleeping or eating
- ◆ Have angry outbursts
- ◆ Blame others for their problems or shortcomings
- ◆ Ruminates and worry over almost anything
- ◆ Have a lot of negative thoughts, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- ◆ Start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public, or going to school
- ◆ Isolate, and immerse themselves in safe, individual activities
- ◆ Complain about not fitting in, or that no one understands them

**What to do to prevent or reduce the potential for childhood anxiety**

It's always good to be proactive. The best time to help your children deal with the potential for anxiety is before it begins. Suggestions are:

- ❖ Extended communication is always your best ally. That old adage that what children need most is our time couldn't be a better fit to help you understand what your child is feeling.
- ❖ Try to get away from denial and avoidance behaviors. It can be hard for parents to come to terms with their children's anxiety. No one wants this for their child, and as a result, it can be easy to miss.
- ❖ Understand that if your child is bringing up a complaint, and they are having a difficult time explaining it to you, there may be another problem. Expand the conversations into other areas of their life to determine if they're hiding anything.
- ❖ Remembering that children don't always express themselves efficiently. Have conversations about everything going on in their lives, and do this as often as you can. Stay connected.
- ❖ This life moves fast, and as a result, anxiety gains momentum quickly, and we don't always have the time to understand that it is there, or what to do about it. Try to slow things down as much as possible.
- ❖ Educate your children, even the younger children, about anxiety, what it feels like, and how to talk about it. There are many primers, and books for younger children and adolescents are available on the subject that are worth sharing with your child.
- ❖ Always validate what your child is saying. You may not agree with what they're reporting, however, make them know that they are important, and whatever they have to talk about is also important to you.
- ❖ Be involved with as many aspects of your child's life as possible. There is a tremendous correlation between time spent with your child, and your ability to understand what they are thinking and feeling. Make part of that time simple, safe, open communication.

### **What to do if you think your child already has anxiety**

If you think your child is already suffering from anxiety, here's the advice:

- ❖ Pay attention to the warning signs about childhood anxiety. If you think your child may be suffering from anxiety, make an appointment with their primary physician to determine if anything else could be causing the problem.
- ❖ It makes sense to make an appointment with the professional counselor, if possible, one who specializes in childhood disorders. The initial consultation

will tell you understand what your child is experiencing, and what you can do to help. Follow the counselor's advice.

- ❖ If possible, increase your communication time with them. This will serve two purposes: a) it will help you understand what they're thinking and feeling, and b) it will help them better understand and communicate any concerns they are having to you.
- ❖ Understand that children will read their parents, and make decisions about whether, or not, the concerns they're expressing are taken seriously, or not. Help them work through that information, but validate them first. Let them know that you are taking them seriously.
- ❖ Make sure your home is an emotionally safe place for your child. Try to keep the pace slow, and pay special attention to what they tell you may be concerning them about life at home.
- ❖ Get as much information as you can about their social life. Though there is often a genetic predisposition to anxiety, environmental factors can seriously affect anxiety's impact on your children's life. Know about their friends, school, sports, and any other activities they're involved in.
- ❖ Educate them. If they do, in fact, have anxiety, it could be a condition that, to some extent, could move forward with them as they grow. Give them the advantage of knowledge, and what to do as their life progresses.
- ❖ Share your concerns with school counselors and teachers, if possible. It's important to make your child's treatment plan something other adults in their lives that can help reinforce.
- ❖ Know your family history as best as you can. There are genetic factors for anxiety, and a sound family history can go a long way to help you define any concerns your child may be having.
- ❖ Take care of yourself. It's difficult to treat your child's anxiety when you are experiencing anxiety, depression, or any other mental health concerns. Family counseling is often a viable option.

### **It's not who they are!**

Always remember that anxiety, that like any other human condition, should never define a person. It's important for you to understand that anxiety is simply something that your child has, not who they are. It is also important that children understand this as early as possible. As young people develop, their life conditions play an important role in defining who they are. Anxiety should be understood as something your child has, and it should never have the power to define who they are, or who they are going to be. They need to understand that it is a condition that can be understood, and that is very certainly beatable.

Most of us can look back on periods of our lives, and say that if we knew more about what was happening at that time, we might have made different decisions regarding how we handled what was occurring. To give your children the best chance to live a happy and productive life, keep them informed. Educate them about anxiety, help them understand that it is something that can be efficiently addressed, and by all means, make sure they understand that it does not change the way you feel about them. There should never be any shame associated with anxiety. Let them know that nothing in this world is more precious to you than they are. Embrace this part of them and, and let them know you are there for them, and you're going to beat this together. They'll love you for it!

Faust Ruggiero is the award-winning author of The Fix Yourself Empowerment Series, and the new *The Fix Your Anxiety Handbook*.

<https://www.fastruggiero.com/>