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Family Focus Increase in Anxiety Among Children and Teens

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

Teachers and health professionals have reported increased anxiety among children and teens in recent years, and I'm seeing it too. In many instances, there is a genetic predisposition for a child to develop anxiety. If you or anyone in your family suffers from anxiety-related conditions, your child may also be affected.

If your child exhibits any of the following behaviors for a lengthy period of time, it is important to seek help from your physician and then possibly a mental health professional: frequent nightmares and fear of being alone in her room at night; inability to fall asleep or go back to sleep if awakening in the middle of the night; sudden lack of concentration in school; compulsive thoughts or behavior (hair-pulling, body image and eating issues, cutting, etc.); or excessive worrying about safety for herself and her family

Some cases of anxiety are less biologically-based and more situational, however. In our current national and world environment, even the calmest among us can be susceptible to bouts of anxiety. One seventeen year-old told me recently that he worries constantly about his future - getting into a good college, finding a satisfying job, being in an enduring relationship, and now more than ever, having the financial means to live a good life. He worries, too, about the environment and unsafe conditions in the world. That's certainly a lot for a young person to carry around!

A twelve year-old girl confides about her worries for her parents' safety because they both travel a lot for work. She is an only child and is frequently left in the care of college-age babysitters during the week. Her family doesn't eat dinner together even when everyone is home. Her parents treat her more like a friend than a child. "Emily" likes to be treated like an equal, but in reality she suffers from not having enough emotional support and time with her parents. Because she was trying hard to suppress her worries, fears, and loneliness, Emily developed an anxiety disorder. Her anxiety attacks became more frequent and alarming, and struck without warning or explanation. Eventually, Emily asked her parents to obtain help for her.

If you see your child struggling with anxiety and feeling less in control, encourage her to share her thoughts and feelings with you. Your child may need more time to be with you and to have opportunities to talk. Find time to relax alone together in interactive ways, not just watching television or videos.

It can help your child to hear that a certain amount of worry and anxiety is perfectly natural and normal, and that she is not alone in feeling this way. And it is comforting for her to know that if she can't handle her feelings on her own, you will help in any way you can.

Try adding additional routines to family life. Children crave routine and certainty. It helps them feel safe. Even though they may complain about "Borinda" and "Boraga," a certain amount of predictability is reassuring. Continue to provide structure and limits for your child. Help her learn and practice relaxation techniques. Bring up changes or future events ahead of time to try to avoid upsetting surprises. And, as always, try to set a good example. If you have your own anxieties, manage them as best you can through increased exercise, meditation or yoga, healthy eating, finding support among friends and family, or possible therapy and/or medication.

When we travel on an airplane and experience unexpected turbulence, it is

natural to watch the flight attendants to see how they are responding to the situation. We want to see them looking calm and relaxed so we can feel reassured. (We just hope they aren't being good actors!) Similarly, children look to us for cues on how to respond to certain situations. Like a virus, anxiety can be transmitted back and forth among family members. By being observant and responsive, you can help your child learn to manage her anxiety.

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