

Pupil mental health: anxiety

Use this to help you answer questions that staff may ask during your training session on anxiety.

Is it normal for children and young people to experience anxiety?

Yes, everyone experiences anxiety in some form at some time. We're probably all familiar with feeling more anxious since the coronavirus pandemic began.

Anxiety is a natural response that's useful in helping us to avoid dangerous situations and motivating us to solve everyday issues.

Some people have a more heightened response to perceived dangerous situations and threats, though, and may suffer from more problematic anxiety.

Does anxiety manifest in the same way with all pupils?

No, it can be different.

Anxiety can vary in severity from a mild uneasiness through to a terrifying panic attack. It can vary in how long it lasts, from a few moments to many years.

The signs to look out for can vary a bit between young children and older children. We've focused on the signs that are more typically seen in children in the age range we work with.

Are there different types of anxiety disorders?

Yes. There's generalised anxiety disorder, where people experience symptoms of anxiety and tension more days than not.

Other types of anxiety disorder include panic disorder, phobias such as agoraphobia and social phobia, separation anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

What causes anxiety in children?

An anxiety disorder may be caused by environmental factors, medical factors, genetics, brain chemistry, substance abuse, or a combination of these.

They're most commonly triggered by stresses children are experiencing in their lives – for example, moving home, changing school, exams, or more recently, the coronavirus pandemic.

Usually, anxiety is a response to external triggers, but it's also possible that children make themselves anxious with 'negative talk', a habit of always telling themselves the worst will happen.

Are there physical signs of anxiety?

Yes. These are:

- Cardiovascular: palpitations, chest pains, rapid heartbeat and flushing
- Respiratory: hyperventilation and shortness of breath
- Neurological: dizziness, headache, sweating, tingling and numbness
- Gastrointestinal: choking, dry mouth, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea
- Musculoskeletal: muscle aches and pains (especially shoulders and lower back), restlessness and shaking

Can anxiety cause other mental health issues?

For many children with anxiety issues, their anxiety doesn't fit neatly into a particular type of anxiety disorder. It's common for people to have some features of several anxiety disorders.

Some children and young people with anxiety also develop depression, and vice-versa. It's important to always get an accurate diagnosis though, so children and young people can be treated for the right conditions.

(Remember: school staff are not expected or equipped to diagnose mental health issues, but can look out for signs that a child may be struggling, report concerns, and support a child day to day.)

Sources

This factsheet was produced by [Safeguarding Training Centre from The Key](https://thekeysupport.com/safeguarding):
thekeysupport.com/safeguarding

- [Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families](https://www.annafreud.org/)
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