

Anxiety Disorders in Young Children

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Anxiety disorders in young children are common and can be very debilitating if left untreated. The treatment of anxiety disorders is based on “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” or CBT. This is a type of therapy/counseling where the child and the parents are taught techniques to manage, limit, change and redirect the anxious and worried feelings. It is a “skill based” therapy emphasizing techniques and strategies which are age appropriate to help the child reduce their own anxiety and cope more adaptively.

First children are thought to recognize their worries, then they are given strategies to create a more realistic appraisal of a situation (why something is unlikely to happen), techniques to reduce the physical feelings they may have (racing heart, rapid breathing, hot skin, stomach ache, etc.) and develop a new mind set in small manageable steps. Here are some more examples of what CBT may teach an anxious child:

Thought stopping – being able to redirect the worry

Fear thermometers – calibrate the feelings to manage them

Self induced relaxation – imagery, breathing, etc.

Understanding the difference between a thought and reality

How does CBT work?

Education – Teaching children how they misperceive and catastrophize – how is anxiety triggered and maintained, how does anxiety trick you and make you misperceive events.

Cognitive Restructuring – New ways to think about scary situations – self talk, internal dialogue, demystifying fears of rejection and humiliation, irrational thoughts of harm – what if’s, think twice, most likely thing, etc.

Relaxation Strategies – How to self calm, being skill smart, worry wise, calm breathing etc.

Re-approach Feared situations – Exposure to the anxiety provoking event with supports to adapt

At what age can a child begin CBT?

Most studies show protocols can work as young as 7-8 yrs with parent support as young as 2-3 years of age.

Who can work with my child using CBT?

A host of therapists, LMHC, LCSW, and guidance counselors are trained in CBT techniques to different degrees.

How long should treatment last?

This depends on the clinician some have specific protocols lasting a certain number of sessions, some may work in a less structured style, occasionally there are groups of children, finally some therapists may work in the natural environment – school, home etc.

Recommended Resources for Parents

www.worrywisekids.org

www.adaa.org – Anxiety Disorders of America Website

Recommended Books

Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries, and Phobias by Tamar Ellsas Chansky

What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety (What to Do Guides for Kids) by Dawn Heubner and Bonnie Matthew

Coping Cat Workbook, Second Edition (Child Therapy Workbooks Series) by Philip C. Kendall and Kristina A. Hedtke