

Anxiety in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of distress, dread, worry, and uneasiness. It is a feeling we get when we fear that something bad is going to happen. Our body then prepares. This is why we feel things like sweating, dizziness, and a racing heart when anxious.

It is normal to feel anxious sometimes. Some people feel anxious a lot, even in situations when there is no clear reason to. This is what we consider an anxiety disorder.

Someone may have an anxiety disorder when:

- They have a lot of anxiety that is hard to control
- The anxiety starts to get in the way of doing things
- They start to avoid things they don't need to

There are many types of anxiety disorders. The type of anxiety disorder depends on when the anxiety happens and the fear the person has.

- **Social anxiety disorder** (anxiety about interacting with or doing things in front of people)
- **Separation anxiety disorder** (anxiety about not being with a caregiver)
- **Generalized anxiety disorder** (frequent worrying about things that are unlikely to happen)
- **Specific phobia** (an intense fear about something)
- **Agoraphobia** (fear of being in situations you can't control or get help)
- **Panic Disorder** (brief and intense waves of anxiety)

Anxiety and Autism

People with autism are more likely to have anxiety disorders. About 40% of people with autism will be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder (compared to 15% of people without autism).

This may be because of differences in processing what other people mean, other social problems, being black-and-white thinkers, and having a hard time solving problems flexibly.

HOW CAN YOU TELL WHEN A CHILD HAS ANXIETY?

Children and teens can have anxiety disorders too. It can be harder to tell when a child has anxiety. They usually don't know something is wrong or what it is. Children who are anxious usually tell us through their actions.

They might be:

- Very emotional or fussy
- Quick to upset or anger
- Withdrawing from others
- Very particular or rigid
- Really sensitive, become easily overwhelmed by surroundings

WHAT ABOUT ANXIETY IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM?

It can be really hard to tell when a child with autism is also suffering from an anxiety disorder. Some signs of anxiety can look a lot like autism, such as social withdrawal and rigidity. Sometimes anxiety can make symptoms of autism look worse.

A child with autism who is anxious may be more repetitive or be more sensory sensitive. You may need help from an expert to figure out if your child with autism has anxiety too.



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Your provider is giving you this handout because they think your child may have anxiety

There are many things you can do to help your child's symptoms:

1. Help your child develop coping tools

- Teach your child the importance of deep breathing & relaxing their muscles to help them calm.
 - Some ideas for coping tools can be found here: <https://www.thehelpfulcounselor.com/18-coping-skills-strategies-for-children-and-teens/>

2. Create schedules and routines

- Predictability and structure is very important for helping children who are anxious
 - Find some ideas for visual schedules here: <https://www.pbisworld.com/tier-2/individual-visual-schedules/>

3. Prepare your child ahead of time when plans change. Help them cope with it

4. Be consistent in your expectations of your child and consequences of their behavior

- Make sure your child understands these things. You may need to use visuals to help them understand.
 - Autism Treatment Network Visual Supports Toolkit: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit/atnair-p-visual-supports-and-autism>

5. Rely on encouragement, praise, and rewards

- Try to limit threats or punishments. Never use physical punishment.
- Other kinds of discipline should be mild and be done very consistently.

6. Model and encourage flexibility, problem-solving, and coping

7. Catch your child's "brave" behavior and praise them

- (e.g., "Wow! You tried something hard!")

8. Encourage your child to do things outside of their comfort zone

- Build up their confidence for these things.
- You can encourage them to do things they are afraid of gradually (step by step) and give them lots of positive feedback.

Other Suggestions

- If your child continues to struggle with their anxiety, you will want to talk with your DBP clinician.
- For young children, or children who may not be able to talk, you could try behavior therapy. A provider would work with you on ways to help your child cope and manage their anxious behavior.
- For older children, or children who are able to talk about their anxiety, cognitive behavior therapy (or CBT) may be used.

Other Resources

- Suggested books & other support: <http://libguides.urmc.rochester.edu/c.php?g=627358&p=4376230>
- Information on types of behavior therapy: <https://childmind.org/article/behavioral-treatments-at-a-glance/>
- Tips to find a mental health provider: <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/MediaLibraries/URMCMedia/childrens-hospital/developmental-disabilities/ndbp-site/documents/find-behavioral-services.pdf>