

- Child psychology

How to spot hidden signs of anxiety in your kids

Experts from Anxiety UK and Youngminds tell LISA SALMON what parents need to look out for

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THE cost-of-living crisis is worrying most adults – but what about children, who are having to deal with less money, anxious parents, exams, plus all the pressures of social media and modern life?



There’s no doubt our kids are feeling the pressure, with NHS data suggesting nearly 300,000 young people in Britain have an anxiety disorder.

This is thought to affect up to 19% of all children and adolescents in the UK, and up to 5% of children younger than 12.

“We know anxiety is the most common psychological condition among children and young people,” says Dave Smithson, operations director at Anxiety UK (anxietyuk.org.uk). “However, the signs of anxiety are not always obvious for parents to spot.”

Children’s Mental Health Week, (February 6–12, childrensmentalhealthweek.org.uk), is an opportunity to highlight this.

Deirdre Kehoe, CO-CEO and director of training and services at children’s mental health charity Youngminds (youngminds.org.uk), says it’s normal for children and young people to experience worry, stress or anxiety at certain points in their lives – such as at exam time, if they have difficult relationships with friends and family, money worries, or are concerned about events in the news.

But she points out: “More and more young people are needing support for their mental health, and anxiety is one of the most common mental health conditions. We know from speaking to young people and from our own research that the past year has been one of the most difficult for young people – emerging from the pandemic to more limited prospects for their futures, coupled with an increase in academic pressure to catch up on lost learning, and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.”

Deirdre says anxiety can become a problem when a young person isn't in a stressful situation, but still feels more worried or panicky than usual.

“As a parent, it can be difficult to know whether your child is going through a hard time, and the signs may not always be obvious,” she adds. “But if you think they might be struggling, there are some things you can look out for.”

Hard-to-spot signs of anxiety in children and young people may include...

1. SLEEP PROBLEMS

“Having difficulty nodding off, having bad dreams and maybe wetting the bed are signs of potential anxiety that could be mistaken for another ailment,” says Dave.

2. NERVOUSNESS

If your child seems less able to cope and more nervous than usual, it may be caused by underlying anxiety, warns Deirdre.

“Symptoms will look different for everyone, but things your child might be experiencing include feeling nervous, overwhelmed, or full of dread,” she says.

3. PHYSICAL PROBLEMS

Minor ailments such as tummy trouble or feeling faint may be indicate there's an underlying issue.

Deirdre says: “Physical symptoms, including feeling faint or having stomach cramps or diarrhoea, can be a sign of anxiety.”

Dave adds: “Tummy upsets and headaches may be a common ailment, but they're also a common side-effect of anxiety in children and young people, especially if they occur frequently and are used as an excuse to avoid school.”

4. BECOMING MORE CLINGY

Dave says another sign to watch for is your child becoming tearful or not wanting to let you go. This is often a sign of separation anxiety, which NHS data suggests is the most common form of anxiety in children under 12.

5. CHANGE IN EATING HABITS

Youngminds says problems with food can begin as a coping strategy when young people are anxious, and they may lose their appetite, or perhaps start comfort eating when they're not hungry. Deirdre advises:

“If you notice there's been a change in eating habits, it might be a sign that they need some help.”

6. LOSING THEIR TEMPER

Teenagers are renowned for flying off the handle – but their outbursts may not just be the result of raging hormones, warns Dave.

“Those teenage outbursts of anger or frustration aren’t just signs of them growing up, but could also be a result of their underlying anxious thoughts and feelings,” he explains.

7. LACK OF CONCENTRATION

If you notice your child is struggling to focus on a given task, it could mean they’re stressing about something.

“This could be another sign of anxiety in children and young people,” says Deirdre.

More and more young people are needing support for their mental health, and anxiety is one of the most common mental health conditions...

8. REDUCED CONFIDENCE

“If you notice your child is becoming withdrawn, or if they seem to lack confidence or get upset, it might be an indicator that they need some help,” warns Deirdre.

Dave points out that a lack of confidence or self-esteem may be an anxiety symptom in adolescents.

Deirdre Kehoe, CO-CEO and director of Youngminds

HOW TO HELP

Deirdre says discussing anxiety with children can be hard, and they might initially struggle to talk about it.

“If they do open up,” she advises, “listen in a non-judgemental way about how they’re feeling. Remind them it’s OK to feel scared or worried, and try to reassure them in an ageappropriate manner. Remember, you don’t need to know all the answers, but talking things through can help them feel calmer.”

She suggests parents research ways to help children feel calmer, including mindfulness, meditation, and grounding techniques.

Deirdre adds: “If you think your child needs professional support, speak to their GP and school, and consider whether counselling or therapy might help. Medication can also help manage the symptoms of anxiety and your GP might suggest this alongside talking therapy.”

You can call the Anxiety UK helpline on 03444 775 774.