



Royal College of
General Practitioners

Top Tips: Anxiety disorders in children and young people

About the authors

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Background

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorders experienced by children and young people (CYP)¹. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is the recommended treatment for anxiety disorders in CYP, but only a minority of CYP with anxiety disorders access any support, and very few receive evidence-based treatment.²

Families face many barriers seeking and accessing effective support for anxiety disorders, including difficulties differentiating between 'normal' and problematic levels of anxiety, uncertainty about when and where to seek help, stigma-related concerns, and limited available support.³

Many families speak to teachers, school staff or other professionals before presenting to primary care, but for others, a general practitioner (GP) will be their first point of contact. GPs can feel ill equipped to effectively support CYP with anxiety disorders.⁴

Top tips for general practitioners

Identifying anxiety disorders

Children and young people with anxiety disorders experience excessive fear, worry or anxiety (that is, they feel more scared, worried or anxious than you would expect in a CYP of their age). They may worry about a range of things or their anxiety may relate to a specific situation or thing (for example, excessive worries about school and performance, social situations, separating from a parent, injections).

- **Look for signs:** Look out for physical symptoms (for example, tummy aches, nausea) and related behaviours (for example, avoiding anxiety-provoking situations, anger outbursts). Be mindful that families may not have recognised the difficulty as 'anxiety' or may not have considered the anxiety as a concern (for example, 'we just thought he was shy'). There may be comorbid problems (for example, depression, autism, ADHD, alcohol or substance use) and increased risk for self-harm behaviour and suicidal ideation.
- **Look for impact on function:** Anxiety can have a negative impact on a CYP's school work, social life, mood, sleep, behaviour and family life. It is normal for a CYP to feel scared, worried and anxious from time-to-time, but it is when fear, worry or anxiety causes a CYP significant distress or interferes with their life (or the lives of their family) that support or intervention may be needed.
- **Listen:** Families want to feel listened to and be heard. Be mindful that parents may have concerns about feeling dismissed or being blamed for their child's difficulties, and may feel their concerns have been dismissed in the past.
- **Talk to CYP and parents separately:** CYP may not want to talk in front of their parent and may have concerns about confidentiality. Parents may also be reluctant to share concerns in front of their child. Explain confidentiality and its limits to CYP and parents.

- **Consider self and parent-reported questionnaires** (see questionnaires and scoring aids in resources) as a guide to assist in diagnosis.

Managing anxiety disorders

- **Don't delay to act:** Where a family shares concerns or you suspect anxiety problems, provide information about self-help resources and sources of support (see below). It is important to be mindful that a CYP may have experienced anxiety difficulties for a long time. If you suspect a safeguarding concern which may trigger the anxiety – act to refer urgently.
- **Be transparent and collaborative:** Families want to receive clear and consistent messages about how best to support a CYP. Discuss and agree with the family whether it would be helpful to liaise with others, for example, school staff. To help CYP feel autonomous, ask questions and give choices, and where possible take a shared management approach.
- **Support CYP to face their fears:** Show empathy and understanding and encourage CYP to face their fears - by avoiding anxiety-provoking situations, a CYP does not get the chance to test out their fear. Arrange follow-up appointments to monitor progress. (See resources for guidance for families on supporting CYP to face their fears).
- **Support families with problem solving:** CYP can experience worry or anxiety related to real-life problems or challenges in their life, for example, if they are a victim of bullying or struggling with school work. In these cases, support the CYP and their parent to find solutions to the problem, and where appropriate signpost and refer to relevant support organisations.
- **Signpost to appropriate self-help resources:** Families are often looking for guidance on strategies to help a CYP manage and overcome their difficulties with anxiety. See resources for young people and families below.
- **Recommend and refer to evidence-based interventions:** CBT is the evidence-based psychological therapy for anxiety disorders in CYP. There is no established evidence for counselling for anxiety disorders in CYP. NICE guidance does not recommend medication as a first-line of treatment for anxiety disorders in CYP. Local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) may offer evidence-based interventions, and if not, should be able to advise on where to access these locally from other NHS, local authority or voluntary sector services.

Resources for professionals

1. Creswell, C., Parkinson, M., Thirlwall, K., & Willetts, L. (2016). *Parent-Led CBT for Child Anxiety: Helping Parents Help Their Kids*. New York: Guilford Press.
2. Widely used questionnaire measure of anxiety and scoring aid: <https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-experience-measures/revised-childrens-anxiety-and-depression-scale-and-subscales/>
3. MindEd is a free educational resource on children and young people's mental health for adults working with or caring for children and young people: www.minded.org.uk/

Resources for young people and families

1. Creswell, C., & Willetts, L. (2018). *Helping your child with fears and worries: A self-help guide for parents*. London: LittleBrown.
2. Willetts, L., & Waite, P. (2014). *Can I tell you about Anxiety?: A guide for friends, family and professionals*: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
3. 'Overcoming' series has self-help books on a range of anxiety difficulties (for adults but may also be used with adolescents), e.g. Meares, K., & Freeston, M. (2015). *Overcoming Worry and Generalised Anxiety Disorder (2nd Ed): A self-help guide using cognitive behavioral techniques*: Robinson Publishing.
4. Young Minds provide information and guidance for families on a range of mental health difficulties, including anxiety <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/anxiety/>
5. Anxiety Canada provide a range of printable 'how to' resources for parents of anxious children <https://www.anxietycanada.com/anxiety-PDF-documents>

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2. Green H, McGinnity A, Meltzer H, Ford T, Goodman R. *Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain, 2004*. doi:10.1037/e557702010-001.
3. Reardon T, Harvey K, Young B, O'Brien D, Creswell C. Barriers and facilitators to parents seeking and accessing professional help for anxiety disorders in children: qualitative interview study. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 2018; 27: 1023-1031
4. O'Brien D, Harvey K, Young B, Reardon, T, Creswell, C. GPs' experiences of children with anxiety disorders in primary care: a qualitative study. *Br J Gen Pract* 2017; 67 (665): e888-e898.

Conflicts of interest

1. Faraz Mughal is the RCGP Clinical Fellow in Mental Health who also authored Top Tips for CYP Mental Health.
2. Cathy Creswell and Polly Waite receive royalties from sales of the books they authored which are listed above.

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