

Fear, Bad Dreams and Avoidant Behavior: The Development Of An Anxious Child

By the time you notice one; all three will already be present. Children try first to solve their own problems. They keep trying until the symptom becomes obvious to someone watching. That will be a parent, teacher, babysitter or another adult. Even though many adults observed the child, only one of them may catch a glimpse of the symptom. That adult was in the right place at the right time, not necessarily more attentive.

Anxiety is a physical reaction brought about by an emotional trigger. It begins as a thought. There might be danger. It isn't like a rock rolling down a hill towards you, making all kinds of noise as it crashes through bushes, picking up speed. That's a clear danger. There is no question how to react to that. This is a suggestion that there might be a rock, maybe right now, in two minutes or two days, that might appear around the next corner and get you or your parents or your cat. But, maybe not. Just in case, you'd better watch out.

The physical response comes next. If there is danger there are two options, fight or flee. In order to do either, fuel is required, adrenaline. The signal goes out to load up on fuel. You are now ready to roll, engine screaming, wheels spinning when, oops, wait a minute, maybe there isn't anything there. Maybe it was just a thought.

The adult brain has stored mountains of data which validate reasons to be concerned. Children don't yet have that data base nor the neurological pathways needed to piece information together. Children just sense and feel. The first feeling is fear.

Children might show fear by being irritable, having a tantrum or crying. They will not be able to put words to why they are reacting. They will not be able to tell you what happened. Usually, these reactions are single events. That's normal. But some children are acutely sensitive. Those children may develop anxiety.

Anxiety at any age follows the same route. It is the excess of adrenaline and the lingering question about danger that causes physical symptoms. Those include wanting to jump out of your skin, feeling faint, clammy, light headed, tingling in fingers and toes, heart racing or skipping beats, etc. In an adult these symptoms may come as a panic attack. In a child it is more subtle and slower to develop. It may be physical or emotional or both. Some sense first through their bodies. Others first register via a psychological process. Sensitive kids soak up stimuli and develop a reaction. It starts with feeling afraid. In time the fear might become a bad dream.

Parents often notice when the child calls out or comes into the bedroom. Many kids keep it to themselves. Bad dreams reinforce fears that pop up during the day. Even at night, when the child should be relaxed and safe, scary things can intrude and threaten.

Eventually the child may become avoidant, such as the child who refuses to enter the classroom or get on the bus or go on the field trip. Most of those children eventually settle down once coaxed to follow through. But unless there is coaching anxiety will develop and reveal itself in unfortunate ways throughout the person's life.

Pushing a child to go ahead, while necessary, is similar to learning to cope with a fear of crowds by forcing oneself to sit in the middle of a crowded theater. It can be endured but there is no pleasure from the experience and other similar situations will likely be avoided. One learns to cope, not to overcome.

Strategies boil down to a few key points. First be knowledgeable of the child's developmental capacity and unique characteristics. Understand that these reactions happen for a good reason. They are rarely at first a manipulation for attention. If bad dreams develop there are ways to help the child become empowered to overcome them. If avoidant behavior is present the child must learn to both push through it but also to understand why symptoms are present so that other, future situations are not similarly avoided.

Smart, sensitive kids develop anxiety because they are smart and sensitive. Help them learn to understand themselves and their own process and you have equipped them with strategies that enable them to manage a world filled with uncertainty.

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About the Author

Ted Lobby is a clinical social worker in private practice in Edina, MN. He works with all ages. He is the author of two books, one to help small children with bad dreams and the other to help adolescents become self regulating. <http://www.anxiouskids.com>