

what you

NEED TO KNOW

about...

Helping Children and Youth with Social Anxiety Information for Parents and Caregivers

What is Social Anxiety Disorder?

Social anxiety disorder (sometimes called social phobia) is a problem for children and youth that makes them very anxious or worried in many everyday situations. Studies show that about 1 in every 20 youth have this disorder. Children and youth with social anxiety can get very worried about:

- Meeting new people
- Going somewhere new
- Speaking in public
- Talking in class
- Eating or drinking in front of others
- Using public toilets when others are nearby
- Making mistakes in front of others



What is the difference between shyness and Social Anxiety Disorder?

Many of us feel shy at one time or another. And some cultures value shyness more than others. Feeling shy at times isn't a problem. In fact, having 'just enough' shyness in the right situations keeps us from doing things that might be embarrassing for ourselves or others. But social anxiety is more than feeling shy sometimes. It is shyness that gets in the way of enjoying school, making friends and getting involved in fun activities. Children and youth with social anxiety try to avoid (or will endure with distress) social situations, like:

- Starting to talk with others who are not close friends or family
- Going to a party or dance
- Talking on the phone
- Talking to people they don't know
- Expressing opinions
- Talking with people in authority (like a teacher or boss)



Bullies may pick on children and youth with social anxiety, because they might seem like an easy target to a bully.

What causes social anxiety?

Many things can contribute to social anxiety, like:

Genetics:

Some children are just born with a tendency or temperament to be more shy and anxious. A child has a greater chance of having anxiety (including social anxiety) if family members have had troubles with anxiety.

Life events:

Children or youth may be more shy or fearful in social situations if they:

- Don't get the chance to learn how to handle social situations (for example, if parents protect them too much from facing these situations).
- Have had negative experiences in the past, like being bullied, teased, embarrassed or rejected.
- Have conflicts or stresses with friends or classmates
- Are not doing well in school or feeling too much pressure to do well in school

It can be hard for adults to see things from a child or teen's point of view. Things that might not seem like a big deal to an adult can be overwhelming to a child or youth. And some children are just more sensitive to stress.

What should we do if we think our child has social anxiety?

Start by taking your child to a doctor (like your family doctor or pediatrician) and describe your child's worries and the situations that are causing anxiety. Your doctor can check for any medical problems. Your doctor can also help to link with psychologists or social workers.

Treatments for social anxiety at a glance...

Social anxiety is often treated with Cognitive (thinking) Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This kind of counseling helps children and youth to:

- Learn to think in more positive ways, which gradually changes the way they feel about things
- Gradually get more comfortable in situations they are afraid of
- Learn and practice social skills
- Solve problems

Counselors can use these methods to help your child. You can learn to use them with your child too.

1

Cognitive Restructuring

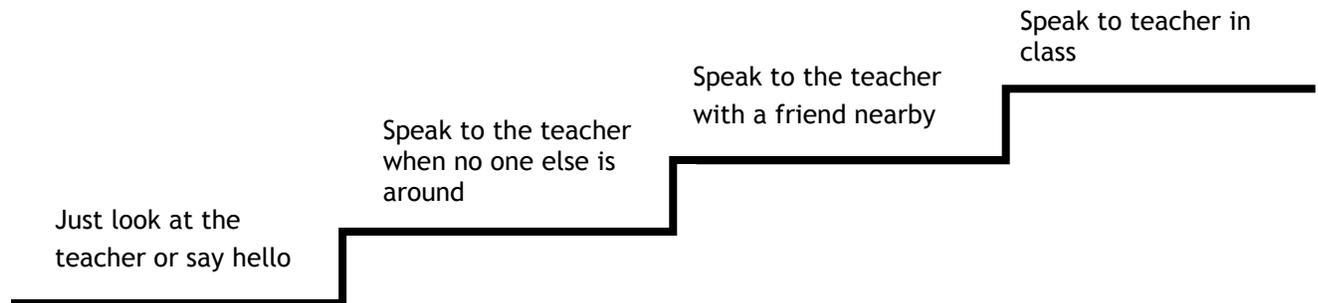
Many children and youth with social anxiety feel that they are not good at anything and have given up trying. Counselors can help children learn to think in different ways and to see themselves and others in a more positive way.



2

Exposure

This involves gradually exposing children and youth to what they fear, until they are no longer afraid. Counselors will do this step by step, starting with things that are easy and working up to things that are harder. For example, if your child is afraid to talk to teachers, the plan might be to:



3

Role plays

These give your child a chance to practice new ways of handling scary situations. For example, if your child finds it hard to talk to other children, you or a counselor can pretend to be a child and your child can practice talking.



4

Social skills training

Because children with social anxiety avoid social situations, they don't get the same chance to learn how to make friends, ask for help, or invite someone to play. A counselor can teach your child the 'rules' and steps to connect with others in a positive way.

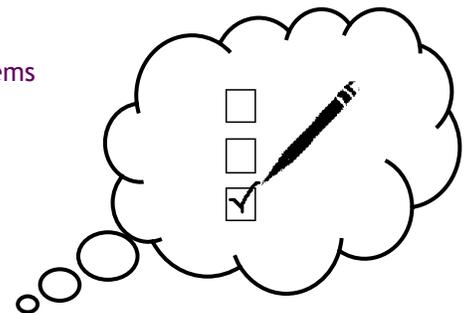


5

Problem solving

A counselor can work with your child to figure out what problems are getting in her way. The counselor will help your child to solve problems by:

- Brainstorming possible solutions
- Thinking about the pros and cons of each solution
- Picking the best solution
- Planning how to make the solution happen



Medications

Medications can be helpful for some children and youth. They must be prescribed by a doctor, like your family doctor or a psychiatrist. They are usually used only when:

- Counseling is not helping
- The anxiety is so severe that counseling is not possible (if your child is too afraid to talk with the counselor)

Helping your anxious child or teen

Understanding and supporting a child or teen who is anxious isn't easy. Here's how you can help:

1. **Don't play the 'blame game'.** Don't blame yourself or your child for the social anxiety problems, it won't help. Instead, focus your energy on trying to make things better. Ask yourself, "What can I do right now to help my child?"
2. **Let your child face his fears.** It is natural to want to protect children and youth from things that worry them. And it can be hard work helping your child work through these feelings. But avoiding situations that make your child anxious can make things worse, because your child misses chances to pick up the skills they need to make and keep friends.
3. **All feelings are OK.** It is natural for parents to want to change their child's feelings when a child is worried or sad. But saying things like, "Don't be sad-there's nothing to be sad about!" tells your child that his feelings are wrong. This can cause your child to keep feelings inside. Encourage your child to tell you how he feels when you have some privacy.
4. **If at first you don't succeed...keep trying!** Children and youth with anxiety usually try to avoid things that challenge and stress them. When your child struggles in some situations:
 - Talk with her about what made it hard
 - Help your child to come up with ideas that might help next time
 - Be sympathetic
 - Give hope by reminding them that there will be more chances in the future to handle things well

Building social skills, one step at a time

Even though it may be scary for your child or teen, he needs to be with others to learn skills for making and keeping friends. You may find it helpful to:

1. **Plan activities with other parents and children.** But don't do too much at once. Too many people at once or too many group activities could be very stressful for your child.
2. **Challenge your child or teen, but not all at once.** Start with something easy, like watching a movie or playing a video game with another child or teen when you are close by. If this works well, try something that requires more talking, like a board game or cards. Having something 'to do' helps to take some of the pressure off of having to talk. Work up to activities with more children or ones that don't have many rules, like 'pretend' games, or just 'hanging out'.
3. **Try not to take over.** Because anxious children find it hard to be social, parents sometimes step in and direct things a little too much. This takes away chances for children to learn how to handle their social lives. Help your child to plan and to solve problems by asking questions and gently making suggestions.



Where to find help in Eastern Ontario

- In a crisis?** Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario, 613-260-2360 or toll-free, 1-877-377-7775
- Looking for mental health help?** www.eMentalHealth.ca is a bilingual directory of mental health services and resources for Ottawa, Eastern Ontario and Canada.
- Renfrew County:** Phoenix Centre for Children, Youth and Families, with offices in Renfrew and Pembroke. 613-735-2374 or toll-free 1-800-465-1870, www.renc.igs.net/~phoenix
- Leeds and Grenville County:** Child and Youth Wellness Centre, with offices in Brockville, Elgin, Gananoque and Prescott. 613-498-4844, www.cywc.net
- Lanark County:** Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth, with offices in Carleton Place, Smiths Falls and Perth. 613-283-8260, www.opendoors.on.ca
- To find a Psychologist anywhere in Ontario:** College of Psychologists of Ontario, 1-800-489-8388, www.cpo.on.ca

Where to find help in Ottawa

- Youth Services Bureau**, for ages 12-20, 613-562-3004
- Family Service Centre of Ottawa**, 613-725-3601, www.familyservicesottawa.org
- Catholic Family Services**, 613-233-8418, www.cfssfc-ottawa.org
- Jewish Family Services**, 613-722-2225, www.jfsottawa.com
- The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre** (by physician's referral), 613-737-7600 ext. 2496. For more information on our programs, www.cheo.on.ca
- To find a Psychologist in Ottawa:** Call the Ottawa Academy of Psychology referral service, 613-235-2529. Listing many, but not all, Ottawa psychologists, www.ottawa-psychologists.org/find.htm



Want more information?

Useful websites

- The Offord Centre, www.knowledge.offordcentre.com, information about mental health conditions
- www.cheo.on.ca, growing information section on mental health and health

Books for Parents

- School Phobia, Panic Attacks and Anxiety in Children* by Marianna Csoti, 2003
- The Worried Child: Recognizing Anxiety in Children and Helping Them Heal* by Paul Foxman, 2004
- Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries and Phobias* by Tamar E. Chansky, 2004
- Your Anxious Child: Raising a Healthy Child in a Frightening World* by Mary Ann Shaw, 2003

Books for Children and Youth

- The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook: Proven, Step-by-Step Techniques for Overcoming Your Fear* (2nd Edition), by Martin Antony, 2008

For more books: see the excellent Mood Problems Reading List from the Offord Centre
www.communityed.ca/docs/booklists/mood_problems.pdf

Authors: Reviewed by the Mental Health Information Committee at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) and by members of the Child and Youth Mental Health Information Network (www.cymhin.ca). Thanks to Sylvia Naumovski and Sarah Cannon, Parents for Children's Mental Health, www.parentsforchildrensmentalhealth.org

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Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

Provided by:

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References

Bridge JA, Iyengar S, Salary CB, Barbe RP, Birmaher B, Pincus HA, Ren L, Brent DA, (2007). Clinical response and risk for reported suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in pediatric antidepressant treatment. A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *JAMA*, 297:1683-1696.