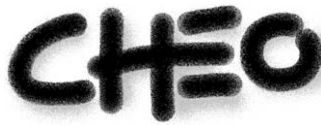


## When a child's fears affect daily life



Last Monday morning, Noah announced to his mother that he didn't want to go to school anymore. In fact, he didn't need to since he already knew everything he ever needed to know about school – at the ripe old age of six! Although his statement made his mother smile, she saw that it was a serious matter to him.

A child may feel too nervous about an upcoming “show and tell” or a recital and might begin to say that he doesn't like school any more or that he has a tummy ache.

Another child, who was teased by his peers about being a messy eater, might stop eating lunch at school altogether in the hope of avoiding the repeated humiliation. He will not want to let his parents know and when his parents notice the full lunchbox, he will simply say that he wasn't hungry or that he didn't have time to eat.

Or it could be your all-star athlete who announces one day that he “hates hockey anyways,” just before a big game or after being chided by his coach.

Anxiety and fear are a normal part of life. Children of all ages and backgrounds are affected by fears or anxiety at some point in their lives.

“Often, it's the fear of being judged, of not being good enough, or of being embarrassed, that makes a child react this way,” says Dr. Douglas Scoular, a psychologist at CHEO. “Even if it seems like your child is making a mountain out of a molehill, their emotional distress may be their way to tell you it's a big deal to him or her and they need your help. It is important to let your child know that you have heard their concerns and, if warranted, to make a plan with your child to address his or her concerns. By doing so, this can often help to lessen their emotional distress.”

You would never scold your child for having asthma or for walking slowly due to a broken leg, so why would you reprimand a child who is so anxious that it is

affecting his schoolwork, his sleep, or his self-esteem? Instead, keeping a calm demeanour may help your child to be calm.

“The equation is quite simple: If you overestimate a threat to you and you underestimate your ability to deal with it, you’ve got the perfect formula for anxiety,” adds Dr. Scoular.

There are typical developmental fears in children; they are:

**Elementary School:** At this age, children start to learn more about the world around them and fear real-life dangers: fires, burglars, earthquakes or illness. With experience, they learn that those are remote dangers rather than imminent ones.

**Middle School:** Social acceptance is their number one concern. Worries about not fitting in and not being accepted are common, as are concerns with athletic abilities and academic success.

**High School:** Teens still worry about social acceptance but they want to find a niche group that will reflect their chosen identities. They may also worry about the world in general, moral dilemmas and their future.

One of the best things you can do is to acknowledge the fears of your child or teenager. Use sentences such as: “I see that this is making you upset.” Show empathy by providing a hug and a gentle look that says – I’m here for you.

“You can’t always remove the problem, but as a parent, you can teach your kids how to deal with it,” says Dr. Scoular. “The good news is that anxiety can often be successfully managed with planning and practice.”

“One of the things you can do is to help your child face his fear and not avoid it. A well planned step by step approach gradually exposing your child to his or her fears is often best. For example, if your child is afraid of a dog, you may start by reading a book about dogs, then observe dogs at a park, and later on, show your child how to approach a dog and eventually pet it. For each step, praise your child’s effort and be patient and calm. Learning to manage fears sometimes takes time,” adds Dr. Scoular.

You could also help your child by reminding him of how brave he can be. With a little practice, your child will be able eventually to focus on his past accomplishment to help him face his anxiety. For example, on the day of a big

game, your athlete could remind himself of how much he loves hockey, that he's never missed a practice and that he will try his best.

Relaxation techniques are also a useful tool to help a child manage his anxiety and fears. To learn more, you can talk to your family doctor or a clinical psychologist who can help you by providing strategies that will help your child.

In Noah's case, his mother eventually contacted his teacher to see if he was doing okay at school. She learned that there was an upcoming show and tell presentation that he didn't seem too enthusiastic about. Noah's mother enlisted his teacher's help and asked her for some advice. The teacher suggested that Noah practise making his presentation at home, in a safe and loving environment, so that he would feel more confident when it came time to deliver it in class. And that's exactly what Noah did. By seeing that he wasn't alone in this, Noah felt better and, despite having a slight tummy ache the morning of his presentation, he felt very proud of himself for facing his fear head on...with a little help from his teacher and his mom.

The following are useful resources to learn more about what your child is going through and how best to help him conquer his fears and manage his anxiety:

#### **Books:**

- *Freeing your Child from Anxiety* by Tamar Chansky, Broadway Books, 2004.
- *What to do When You Worry Too Much: A kids' guide to overcoming anxiety* by Dawn Huebner, Magination Press, 2006.
- *Living Fully with Shyness and Social Anxiety: A comprehensive guide to gaining social confidence* by Erika B. Hilliard, Marlowe & Company, 2005
- *Helping your Anxious Child: A step-by-step guide for parents* by Ronald Rapee, New Harbinger Publications, 2000.

#### **Websites:**

- WorryWise Kids [www.childocdandanxiety.org](http://www.childocdandanxiety.org)
- The Child Anxiety Network [www.childanxiety.net](http://www.childanxiety.net)
- Nemours Foundation [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

- Anxiety Disorders Association of Ontario [www.anxietydisordersontario.ca](http://www.anxietydisordersontario.ca)

### **Event for Families:**

The psychologists at CHEO present an evening of information on Monday March 29, 2010.

Come and listen to the psychologists at CHEO from 7:00 p.m. to 9:15 p.m. at Hillcrest High School, located at 1900 Dauphin Street, Ottawa, Ontario.

Join your friends and neighbours in the auditorium at Hillcrest High School for an exciting evening of presentations and information sharing by psychologists from CHEO.

Dr. Katherine Henderson will be our Keynote speaker and will be presenting on Body Image at 7P.M. Following this, we will break into groups to hear from...

- Dr. Jenny Demark : Why won't my child do as I say? The ABCs of improving cooperation and compliance
- Dr. Linda Reinstein & Dr. Patricia Behnke: Autism 101 • Dr. Douglas Scoular: Understanding Anxiety in Children and Youth
- Dr. Phil Ritchie: Stress Management for Children and Adolescents
- Dr. Simone Kortstee: The Importance of Sleep for Children and Adolescents

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