

New School Year Brings an Increase in Anxiety for Children by Cindy Thygeson, M.D. Director of Medical Affairs at Sutter Center for Psychiatry



As summer comes to an end and children head back to school for the fall, anxiety levels are on the rise. At Sutter Center for Psychiatry, we see a dramatic increase in cases exacerbated by anxiety and stress as school returns to session.

Transitional times like these tend to be very difficult for children as they face new fears and stress. All of a sudden children have pressures to perform academically and adjust to social, parental and teacher expectations that are not necessarily present during the summer months.

To help ease the shock of these pressures, consider these practical strategies to make the most of the transition period with the start of the new school year. Anticipating and planning is the best way to address anxiety to the benefit of both parents and children. Recognize and use cues that school is around the corner — including back-to-school shopping and an increased focus on academic activities such as reading to help prepare your child for the upcoming change.

Like anything else, there are varying degrees of the effects of anxiety. Newer epidemiological research indicates that more than 80 percent of depressed adolescents have a history of childhood anxiety. Unlike adults, children display anxiety symptoms differently. Rather than verbalizing these feelings, children express it behaviorally, physically and cognitively.

Feeling anxious can interfere with their mood, concentration and decision-making abilities, which can be misinterpreted as problems with attention or learning. Some children seem overly tense, seek constant reassurance and may be eager to please, while other children act out.

More obvious behaviors include clinginess, separation difficulties, excessive shyness and oppositional behaviors. Anxiety expressed as physical symptoms are very common, difficult to recognize, but also very important to recognize in kids. Ongoing unexplained, physical complaints — such as difficulty breathing, dizziness, stomach aches, problems sleeping, or feeling like they have a lump in their throat — can be a psychological issue rather than a physiological one.

Anxiety disorders — the most common mental health issue — are frequently overlooked or misjudged. When they go untreated, children struggle with self-esteem and are unable to develop age-appropriate coping skills, and this contributes to problems at home and at school. The typical pattern of these children becoming unengaged in the classroom results in poor achievement relative to their potential. The negative self-image that ensues contributes to poor motivation to study and participate in class and causes more social and academic difficulties, continuing as a negative perpetual cycle. Besides the more immediate implications, research indicates that about half of adults with anxiety disorders report having left education early, and half of those report later in life that untreated anxiety was the primary reason.

If you have concerns about a child, the first step is to speak with them about what their concerns are and what they are experiencing. This issue is not necessarily based on

“what” a child is worrying about, but rather that the worry takes on a life of its own and impacts the child in day-to-day life. Don’t underestimate the power of understanding and reassuring a child by letting him or her know that things will be OK; this really makes a difference.

At school, it can be helpful to identify a “safe place” where your children may go when feeling upset. This may save them from resorting to maladaptive ways of coping. If the very common school-refusal pattern starts, it is important to address the issue immediately and have them return to school as soon as possible. In the end, the longer kids are out of school, the more anxiety is fed and unwanted behaviors are reinforced.

If your child’s anxieties start to interfere with daily activities in school, socially and his or her overall well-being, this is a sign to seek professional intervention. Talk with the child’s teacher or school guidance counselor. You want to discuss this with your pediatrician or a mental health professional. Write down examples about the concerns that you have to take to your visit. With better understanding of what your child is experiencing, you are better able to be of support to your child.

It is not uncommon to have difficulty navigating the mental health system. Sutter Center for Psychiatry is available to help determine and provide the best setting for a comprehensive assessment and offer guidance through the next steps. Sutter Center for Psychiatry is the only hospital in Northern California that treats children under the age of 12, throughout the spectrum of inpatient and outpatient programs it offers.

We believe in the importance of individualizing care for each person to provide the most effective care. Treatment with a professional who believes in recovery, keeps a global view and gives you options as a partner in treatment is what I believe sets us apart at Sutter Center for Psychiatry. It is not about treating



(Continued on page 22)

(Continued from page 11)

one aspect of a person's life – but giving tools and guidance to have that individual improve the overall quality of their life and their relationships. That is lasting treatment.

Whatever you try, the most important thing is to remember in this journey is that what works for one person may not be right for another. If one thing doesn't seem to work, continue your search and don't give up. The good news is, with a little knowledge and appropriate treatment, problems today can easily become yesterday's news!

Here are signs that a child may be experiencing more than just normal anxiety:

- Having difficulty separating from people or being unnaturally clingy
- Constantly having thoughts and fears about the safety of themselves or others
- Having worries about things before they happen
- Being overly self-critical and perfectionistic
- Being preoccupied with embarrassment or making mistakes
- Having low self esteem
- Having trouble falling asleep, frequent nightmares, or difficulty sleeping alone
- Difficulty learning and trouble sitting still

Author's Bio

Cindy Thygeson, M.D., a board-certified pediatric and adult psychiatrist, serves as the

Director of Medical Affairs for the Sutter Center for Psychiatry, the only not-for-profit psychiatric hospital in the community. Associated with Sutter Medical Center, Sacramento, it is also the only psychiatric hospital that is part of an integrative health care system in the region. Sutter Medical Center and Sutter Center for Psychiatry are part of Sutter Health, Northern California's largest health-care network. For more on Sutter's psychiatric services, visit

www.suttermedicalcenter.org/psychiatry , or call **(916) 386-3000 or (800) 801-3077** .