

Anxiety Screenings Recommended for Kids

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recently announced a recommendation that all children and adolescents aged eight to 18 years be screened for anxiety. The goal of the new recommendation is to diagnose and treat anxiety disorders early on. Early diagnosis is important because, often times, untreated anxiety in childhood follows the person into adulthood and can progress into other anxiety disorders, depression, or both.

“Anxiety can become problematic over the lifetime of a person if it’s not addressed early in their life. There are coping mechanisms that are easier to learn when you’re a small child. A lot of times it can be kind of a hidden thing, so screening might bring up issues that parents aren’t recognizing, or they think it is something else other than anxiety,” says Marybeth Evans, an OSF HealthCare licensed clinical social worker.

The 2018-2019 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH) found that nearly 8% of children and adolescents aged three to 17 years had an anxiety disorder. However, anxiety disorders in kids sometimes fly under the radar, which is why that number could be even higher, and why the recommendation includes even those who are not showing the commonly recognized signs and symptoms of anxiety.

Anxiety disorders can present in a variety of ways, especially in young children who may have a difficult time describing their feelings. Evans says there are some signs of anxiety that might be mistaken for other things or that might be brushed off as simply a child having a bad day. While a professional should make the official diagnosis, there are some things parents can watch for that could be a sign their child might have an anxiety disorder.

“Often times, you will see it first when children have to separate from their parents, and there is crying and hanging on to the parents and being afraid to try new things. Sometimes it’s having trouble sleeping at night, not being able to fall asleep or stay asleep, or having nightmares. Sometimes kids don’t necessarily look anxious, but they can be irritable or angry, or complain of physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches, or something else in particular that keeps them from doing something they don’t want to do,” Evans explains.

Evans adds that sometimes anxiety can present as behavioral problems like lashing out or becoming cranky over things that seem miniscule. A significant life event can also trigger anxiety in a child who perhaps never had feelings of anxiety in the past, and this can progress into an anxiety disorder if not managed early on. In other cases, anxiety in kids can present as an intense need to perform well at school, in sports, or in other parts of their life, and not being able to cope well when they don’t excel – like getting a poor grade on a test.

“Some kids are perfectionists by nature and that can be a form of anxiety, so it is good to teach a child that they don’t always have to be perfect, that trying and doing their best is good enough,” says Evans.

There is no clear cut answer to determining whether your child might have an anxiety disorder, which is why these regular screenings can help. Talk to your child’s pediatrician at their next annual physical about screening for anxiety. If you have noticed a change in behavior or think your child might be exhibiting any signs of an anxiety disorder, make an appointment with their pediatrician to discuss it. If their doctor thinks an anxiety disorder might be present, he or she will be able to diagnose it or can make a referral to a mental health professional for further assessment. Getting a proper diagnosis is the first step in helping your child manage their anxiety.

If a parent has a diagnosed anxiety disorder, it may not come as a shock if their child also develops anxiety at some point. Some parents, however, may have no history with anxiety and may not personally know anyone struggling with an anxiety disorder. In those cases, it can be difficult for parents to know the best way to help their child. Evans recommends taking it one day at a time.

If your child has an anxiety disorder, Evans says one thing to avoid is bringing up the anxiety or mentioning things that make them anxious unless it comes up or the child seems to be exhibiting signs of anxiety. Having an anxiety disorder does not mean the child is always feeling anxious, and sometimes talking about the anxiety when it is not on your child’s mind can trigger the anxious feelings. If your child seems to be having a bad day or it seems like something might be going on, Evans says not to avoid the topic but to talk to the child, ask what is upsetting them, and take the time to listen to them without responding right away.

The good news is that once there is a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder, you can start the process of helping your child cope with their anxiety on a daily basis. Remind your child that this doesn’t mean something is wrong with them, but that now you will be able to help them move forward so these feelings can hopefully become more manageable. There are treatment options available and getting your child set up with a mental health professional such as a therapist is a good starting point.

Evans advises, “Especially if it’s becoming something that is interfering with their everyday functioning, definitely the child should be seeing somebody who has ability to treat anxiety in children. There are a lot of therapists that work with young children and other therapists that work with teenagers, and some that work with both. Somebody who is good in their field can usually help a child overcome their anxiety fairly quickly, and sometimes they will work with the parent to help the parent follow through at home.”