

How to help spot the signs of anxiety in children with autism



Although some fears and worries are typical in children, persistent or extreme forms of fear and sadness could be due to anxiety or depression. Kids who are on the autism spectrum are more likely to feel anxious than those who aren't. And when they do feel anxious, it's usually stronger and happens more often. Nearly 4 out of every 10 kids with autism also have at least one anxiety problem.

Why it matters: Anxiety disorders are more common in children who have autism than their nonautistic friends. Contributing factors for people with autism include sensory differences, communication differences, intolerance of uncertainty, and difficulty understanding social situations and disruptive changes to routine.

Going deeper: Even though it is not necessarily aligned with autism, many individuals with autism experience high levels of anxiety. Research varies, but studies suggest that nearly 40-50% of people who have autism receive a clinical diagnosis of anxiety, and of those, roughly 47% fall into the severe anxiety category.

Why's that? Different social situations and high sensory environments can increase stress and anxiety for children with autism. They might feel left out, lonely, misunderstood or invisible. In addition to these, a simple, unexpected change in daily routine can increase anxiety and have a negative effect on their mental health.

Kids are more likely to have an anxiety disorder if they:

- Have another condition like autism or ADHD.
- Have a parent with anxiety.
- Went through difficult events when they were younger, like abuse or neglect.

See the signs: Dr. Danielle Madril from UnitedHealthcare has some tips to help figure out when everyday stress turns into something bigger, like a childhood anxiety issue.

Some signs of anxiety include feeling really scared or worried all the time. But when those feelings come with physical symptoms like a fast heartbeat, sweating, headaches, difficulty sleeping, excessive sweating, twitches or stomach troubles, it might mean the child has an anxiety disorder. In children, this can also look like anger, irritability or outbursts that don't seem to fit the situation. A child with autism may not be able to tell you they are having physical symptoms of anxiety, and it may come out as a tantrum, self-injury, or trying to escape or avoid certain situations.

Below are some of the most common anxiety disorders among kids and teens:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD):** This is when a kid worries a lot about all sorts of things, from school stuff to everyday things like hanging out with friends.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder:** This happens when a kid is too scared to be around other people, like going to school or parties.
- **Specific Phobias:** This is when a kid is super scared of one thing, like spiders or storms.

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Advice and tips: Below are some general tips and guidance you might want to try when helping someone with autism manage their anxiety.

- Understand the triggers.
- Make the environment work by reducing certain triggers.
- Use relaxation and calming activities.
- Create visual schedules.
- Have visual schedules to help structure the day and reduce uncertainty within your day.
- Teach different breathing techniques.

Getting help: If you think your child might have an anxiety disorder, talk to their pediatrician or a licensed therapist. They might suggest things like relaxation exercises or therapy to help them feel better. If those things don't help, the doctor might recommend medicine or more specialized therapy.