

ANXIETY

What is the skill?

Anxiety is a normal emotional response that helps children recognize danger and prepare to respond. It is part of the body's natural alarm system and can help children stay safe in unfamiliar or challenging situations. In healthy development, anxiety is temporary, proportional to the situation, and decreases when children receive comfort and reassurance from trusted caregivers.

What does normal development look like?

Children experience age-appropriate fears throughout development. Infants may become distressed when separated from caregivers, preschoolers often fear the dark or imaginary creatures, and school-age children may worry about school performance or friendships. As children repeatedly experience caregivers who protect, comfort, and reassure them, they gradually learn that most situations are manageable and that uncomfortable feelings will pass.

How does neglect interfere?

Neglect can prevent children from developing a reliable sense of safety. When caregivers are inconsistent or unavailable, children may learn that they must remain alert because no one else will recognize or respond to danger. Over time, the brain's stress-response system may become overly sensitive, causing children to react to everyday situations as though they are threatening. This heightened vigilance can persist even after children enter safe, nurturing environments.

What might this look like?

Children experiencing anxiety may worry excessively, cling to caregivers, avoid unfamiliar situations, become distressed by changes in routine, or frequently seek reassurance. Some children complain of headaches or stomachaches, have difficulty sleeping, or appear unusually perfectionistic because they fear making mistakes. Others may seem irritable or become easily overwhelmed rather than appearing obviously fearful.

Parenting implications

Caregivers can support anxious children by creating predictable routines, responding calmly to fears, and providing reassurance without dismissing the child's feelings. Rather than forcing children into situations they fear, gradual exposure combined with consistent emotional support helps build confidence. It is also helpful to remember that progress often occurs slowly as children learn through repeated experiences that they are safe.

From Understanding to Attunement

An anxious child is often not overreacting—they are responding with a nervous system that has learned to expect danger. Every calm, predictable interaction helps teach the brain that safety is possible.