

what you

NEED TO KNOW

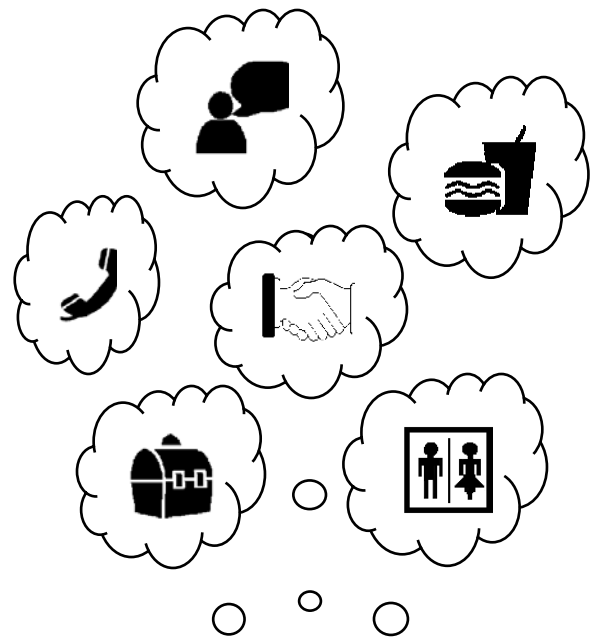
about...

Helping Children and Youth with Social Anxiety Information for Parents and Caregivers

What is Social Anxiety Disorder?

Social anxiety disorder is sometimes called social phobia. It is a problem for children and youth that makes them very anxious or worried in many everyday situations. Studies show that about 1 in every 20 youth have this disorder. Children and youth with social anxiety can get very worried about:

- Meeting new people
- Going somewhere new
- Speaking in public
- Talking in class
- Eating or drinking in front of others
- Using public toilets when others are nearby
- Making mistakes in front of others



What is the difference between shyness and Social Anxiety Disorder?

Many of us feel shy at one time or another. Some cultures value shyness more than others. Feeling shy at times isn't a problem. In fact, having 'just enough' shyness in the right moments can keep us from doing things that could embarrass ourselves or others. But social anxiety is more than feeling shy sometimes. It is shyness that gets in the way of enjoying school, making friends and getting involved in fun activities. Children and youth with social anxiety try to avoid social situations (or they endure them, but with distress). For example, they may avoid:

- Trying to talk with people who are not close friends or family
- Going to a party or dance
- Talking on the phone
- Talking to people they don't know
- Expressing opinions
- Talking with people in authority (like a teacher or boss)



Bullies may pick on children and youth with social anxiety. This is because they might seem like an easy target to a bully.

What causes social anxiety?

Many things can contribute to social anxiety, such as:

Genetics:

Some children are born with a temperament that is shy and anxious. A child has a greater chance of having anxiety (including social anxiety) if family members have had troubles with anxiety.

Life events:

Children or youth may be more shy or fearful in social situations if they:

- Don't get the chance to learn how to handle social situations (for example, if parents protect them too much from facing these situations).
- Have had negative experiences in the past such as: being bullied, teased, embarrassed or rejected.
- Have conflicts or stresses with friends or classmates
- Are not doing well in school
- Are feeling too much pressure to do well in school

It can be hard for adults to see things from a child or teen's point of view. Things that might not seem like a big deal to an adult can be overwhelming to a child or youth. And some children are just more sensitive to stress.

What should we do if we think our child has social anxiety?

Start by taking your child to a doctor (your family doctor or pediatrician). Describe your child's worries and the situations that are causing anxiety. Your doctor can check for any medical problems. Your doctor can also help to link you with psychologists or social workers.

Treatments for social anxiety at a glance...

Social anxiety is often treated with Cognitive (thinking) Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This kind of counseling helps children and youth to:

- Learn to think in more positive ways - which slowly changes how they feel about things
- Slowly become more comfortable in the situations they fear
- Learn and practice social skills
- Solve problems

Counselors use these methods to help your child. You can learn to use them with your child, too.

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Cognitive Restructuring

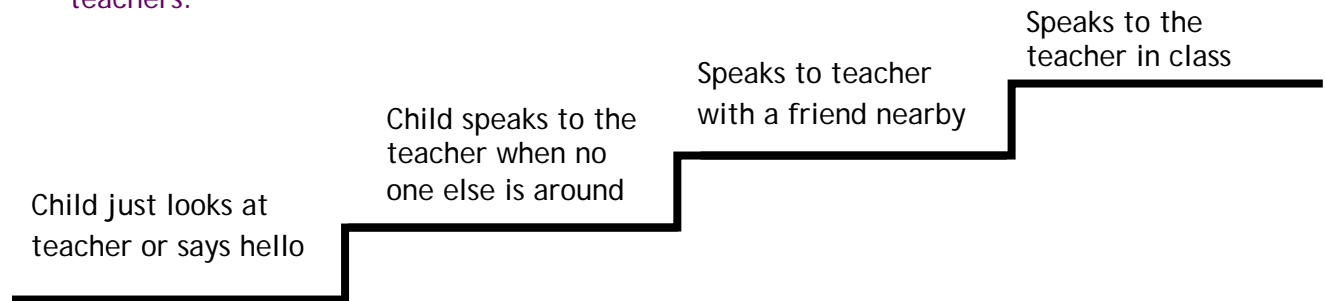
Many children and youth with social anxiety feel that they are not good at anything. They may have given up trying. Counselors can help children learn to think in different ways. They can help kids to see themselves and others in a more positive way.



2

Exposure

This involves gradually exposing children and youth to what they fear, until they are no longer afraid. Counselors will do this step by step. They start with things that are easy and work up to things that are harder. For example, this could be the plan if your child is afraid to talk to teachers:



3

Role plays

These give your child a chance to practice new ways of handling scary situations. For example, if your child finds it hard to talk to other children, you (or a counselor) could try this. You could *pretend* to be another child so your child can practice talking to one.



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Social skills training

Because children with social anxiety avoid social situations, they do not easily learn how to make friends, ask for help, or invite someone to play. A counselor can teach your child the steps to connecting with others in a positive way.

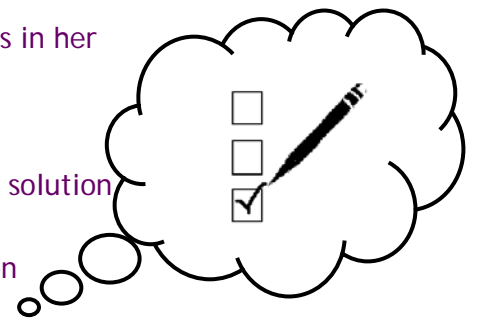


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Problem solving

A counselor can work with your child to figure out the problems in her Way. The counselor will help your child to solve problems by:

- Brainstorming possible solutions
- Thinking about the pros and cons of each solution
- Picking the best solution
- Planning how to make the solution happen



Medications

Medications can be helpful for some children and youth. They must be prescribed by a doctor (your family doctor or a psychiatrist). Medications are usually used when:

- Counseling is not helping
- The anxiety is so severe that counseling is not possible (if your child is too afraid to talk with the counselor)

Understanding and supporting an anxious child or teen isn't easy. Here's how you can help:

1. **Try not to play the 'blame game'.** Avoid blaming yourself or your child for social anxiety problems; it won't help. Instead, focus your energy on trying to make things better. Ask yourself, "What can I do right now to help my child?"
2. **Let your child face his fears.** It is natural to want to protect children and youth from things that worry them. It can be hard work helping your child work through these feelings. But it can make things worse if you let your child avoid situations that make them anxious. This is because your child misses chances to pick up the skills they need to make and keep friends.
3. **All feelings are OK.** It is natural for parents to want to change their child's feelings when a child is worried or sad. But saying things like, "Don't be sad-there's nothing to be sad about!" tells your child that his feelings are wrong. This can cause your child to keep feelings inside. Encourage your child to tell you how he feels. Do this when you have some privacy together.
4. **If at first you don't succeed...keep trying!** Children and youth with anxiety usually try to avoid things that challenge and stress them. When your child struggles in some situations:
 - Talk with her about what made it hard
 - Help your child to come up with ideas that might help next time
 - Be sympathetic
 - Give hope by reminding them that there will be more chances in the future to handle things well

Building social skills, one step at a time

Even though it may be scary for your child or teen, he needs to be with others to learn skills for making and keeping friends. You may find it helpful to:

1. **Plan activities with other parents and children.** But don't do too much at once. It could be very stressful for your child to be around too many people at once. Too many group activities could also be stressful.
2. **Challenge your child or teen, but not all at once.** Start with something easy. For example, stay close by and have your child watch a movie or play a video game with another child or teen. If this works well, try something that requires more talking (such as a board game or cards). Games are something 'to do'. They help reduce the pressure of having to talk. Work up to activities with more children. Or try ones that don't have many rules (such as 'pretend' games, or just 'hanging out').
3. **Try not to take over.** Because anxious children find it hard to be social, parents sometimes step in and direct things too much. This takes away chances for children to learn how to handle their social lives. Help your child to plan and to solve problems by asking questions and gently making suggestions.



Where to find help in Nova Scotia

- In a crisis? Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team, 902-429-8167 or toll-free, 1-888-429-8167
- To find a Psychologist anywhere in Nova Scotia: Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia, 902-422-9183, www.apns.ca
- To find a Social Worker anywhere in Nova Scotia: Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers, 902-429-7799, www.nsasw.org
- Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868, www.kidshelpphone.ca
- Feed Nova Scotia Helpline, 902-421-1188 (within HRM) or, 1-877-521-1188

Where to find help in Halifax Regional Municipality

- IWK Mental Health & Addictions, offers programs for ages up to 19, 902-464-4110 or toll-free, 1-888-470-5888 (ask to be connected to Central Referral), www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health
- Laing House, offers programs for ages 16 to 30 living with a mental illness, 902-425-9018, www.lainghouse.ca
- Emotions Anonymous, peer support for anyone with suicidal thoughts or tendencies, and depression & anxiety, www.emotionsanonymous.org

Want more information?

Useful websites

- Teen Mental Health, www.teenmentalhealth.org/for-families-and-teens/generalized-anxiety-disorder/
- Anxiety BC, www.anxietybc.ca
- Youth Beyond Blue, www.youthbeyondblue.com
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America, www.adaa.org
- Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada, www.anxietycanada.ca

Books for Parents

- *School Phobia, Panic Attacks and Anxiety in Children* by Marianna Csoti, 2003
- *The Worried Child: Recognizing Anxiety in Children and Helping Them Heal* by Paul Foxman, 2004
- *Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries and Phobias* by Tamar E. Chansky, 2004
- *Your Anxious Child: Raising a Healthy Child in a Frightening World* by Mary Ann Shaw, 2003

Want more information?

Books for Children and Youth

- The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook: Proven, Step-by-Step Techniques for Overcoming Your Fear* (2nd Edition), by Martin Antony, 2008

Authors: Reviewed by the Mental Health Information Committee at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) and by members of the Child and Youth Mental Health Information Network (www.cymhin.ca). Thanks to Sylvia Naumovski and Sarah Cannon, Parents for Children's Mental Health, www.parentsforchildrensmentalhealth.org

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Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

Provided by:

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References

Bridge JA, Iyengar S, Salary CB, Barbe RP, Birmaher B, Pincus HA, Ren L, Brent DA, (2007). Clinical response and risk for reported suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in pediatric antidepressant treatment. A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *JAMA*, 297:1683-1696.

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902-464-4110 Central Referral
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