

# Parent Guide



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## What is this resource and how do I use it?

If your child becomes anxious in social situations or you have noticed anxious traits, use our guide to find out a bit more. It includes information about the signs to look out for as well as signposting where to head for support. There are handy tips to help your child learn about their anxiety and manage it effectively.

## What is the focus of this resource?

Knowledge of Social Anxiety

Empowering Parents of Children With SEND

Practical Support Suggestions

## Further Ideas and Suggestions

We have lots of other helpful parent guides in our '**Supporting a Child with...**' series, including supporting a child with **selective mutism** or **dysfluency (stammering)**. You can also find out about the wealth of SEND support available to you with our '**Who's Who?**' guidance.

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# Supporting a child with Social Anxiety

## A Guide for Parents





# What is anxiety?

Many of us will experience anxiety at some point in our lives. Anxiety is when we feel afraid, overly worried or tense about something, usually an upcoming event or something that might happen in the future. Often, this feeling will have a clear cause (i.e. the event we are anxious about) and will soon disappear.

An anxiety disorder is different. This can impact a person's daily life; they might not be able to remember the last time they felt relaxed. There are different anxiety disorders - this guide focuses on **social anxiety disorder**.

## What is social anxiety?

**Social anxiety disorder** (sometimes referred to as social phobia) is a long-term and overwhelming fear of social situations. It's more than 'shyness'; social anxiety can make a person feel fearful of how they appear or how they are perceived in a social situation, which gets in the way of day-to-day life. It has been described as an 'intense self-consciousness' or fear of embarrassment in social situations. Social anxiety disorder can affect a person's school life, relationships, self-confidence and daily routines.

Many people sometimes worry about social situations but a person with social anxiety disorder feels overwhelmingly scared and on edge before, during and after the event. A range of social situations can affect people living with social anxiety in different ways, including speaking in groups, reading aloud, attending parties, performing, answering a question in the classroom or making phone calls, to name a few examples.

Usually, social anxiety in children shows itself between the ages of 8 and 15 but it can develop before or after this. It's important to note that a child might try to hide their anxiety because they don't want the attention on them or fear being judged or criticised, which, in itself, can cause more anxiety.



# Signs of Social Anxiety

There are a variety of symptoms of social anxiety - some symptoms might be easy for your child to hide, while others might be more noticeable. Lots of children might try to hide their anxiety for fear of being watched, embarrassed or judged, which can then create more anxiety. Here are some symptoms to look out for:

- loss of appetite
- feeling sick
- shaking or trembling
- headaches
- chest pains
- sweating
- breathlessness
- faster, irregular or more noticeable heartbeat
- lightheadedness
- dizziness
- feeling hot
- crying or getting upset more often
- becoming angry, aggressive and lashing out
- feeling tense, nervous and unable to relax
- worrying about the past or future
- unable to sleep
- difficulty concentrating
- difficulty doing things while others are watching for fear of being judged or doing the 'wrong thing'
- fear of being criticised
- fear of the worst happening
- worrying about doing something embarrassing (such as blushing, sweating or saying the wrong thing)
- obsessive thoughts
- unable to enjoy leisure time
- needs support to form or maintain relationships
- low self-esteem
- worried about trying new things
- avoiding interactions, places or situations that create anxiety (including social events, group conversations and eating with others)
- worrying about everyday activities (including school, starting conversations, speaking to strangers, social events and performances)
- not asking for help
- compulsive behaviour, such as constantly checking things
- reliant on parent/carers
- panic attacks



# What is a panic attack?

Many of us will experience anxiety at some point in our lives. Anxiety is when we feel afraid, overly worried or tense about something, usually an upcoming event or something that might happen in the future. Often, this feeling will have a clear cause (i.e. the event we are anxious about) and will soon disappear.

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- Your child might notice their heartbeat racing.
- They could feel faint, dizzy or lightheaded.
- They might feel like they're losing control, which can make them upset or angry.
- You might notice your child trembling, shaking and sweating.
- Their breathing might seem fast or irregular.
- Your child might feel sick or like they need the toilet.

It can be very distressing to have a panic attack and it can also be upsetting to see your child go through one. Try to stay calm and be there for your child. We have more tips later in this guide for how to support your child, including what to do if they have a panic attack.



# What causes social anxiety?

There is no specific cause for social anxiety disorder; most professionals believe that a combination of genetic and environmental factors contribute. Here are some possible causes:

## Inherited traits:



Anxiety disorders can run in families but it isn't clear how much these disorders are influenced by genetics or how much could be learned behaviour.

## Brain structure:



Some people have an overactive amygdala (a structure in the brain), which can heighten their fear response, causing increased anxiety in social situations.

## Environment:



If your child has experienced a particularly unpleasant or embarrassing social situation, this might have caused their social anxiety to develop. Also, if they live in an environment with adults who are anxious, overprotective or controlling, this can lead to increased social anxiety. When adults display anxious behaviours, children notice and are likely to learn them.

Stressful events can increase social anxiety. Here are some examples:



- moving house
- moving school
- death of a family member or friend
- bullying
- changes at school (such as a new class, friendship issues or a new teacher)
- witnessing arguments or fights

Any change can be unsettling for someone with social anxiety disorder, particularly those that involve meeting new people and mixing in new groups.

Children with **ADHD** or **Autistic** children are more likely to have anxiety or display anxious traits. A child with social anxiety disorder might also live with other mental health issues, such as generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder or depression.



# Diagnosis

There are lots of ways to manage anxiety and treatments available to help. If social anxiety is having a big impact on your child's life, it's really important that you seek help and advice. Although social anxiety disorder might be something your child has for the rest of their life, they won't be dealing with this alone and it can be made much more manageable, so it has minimal impact day-to-day.

**Note:** Of course, taking your child to see a health professional can, in itself, be an anxiety-provoking situation. However, it's important to model the correct way to deal with a problem. Reassure your child that talking to a doctor or therapist is a big step towards finding a solution. Health professionals deal with social anxiety all the time, so they'll understand how your child is feeling. **Do not avoid situations that make your child anxious;** avoidance might relieve anxiety in the short-term but can worsen the symptoms in the long-term.

You can go to see your GP, who will talk to your child about their anxiety. They'll want to know how they feel when their anxiety is at its worst, as well as their symptoms and behaviours so they can understand their anxiety. To prepare for this, why not chat to your child at home before the appointment so they feel more prepared? They could even make some notes to take with them. Use these questions as prompts:

- How do you feel when you wake up? How do you feel at bedtime?
- What happens in your day? What is your favourite part of the day? What is your least favourite part of the day?
- What is school like? Do you enjoy school?
- Which activities do you enjoy? Which activities do you dislike? Why?
- Do you like meeting new people? Do you have a group of friends? What do you like to do with your friends?
- When you feel anxious, what happens in your mind? What happens in your body?

Your GP might suggest some ways you and your child can improve the situation. They can also refer your child for an assessment with your local children and young people's mental health services (**CYPMHS**). After an assessment, your child might be diagnosed with social anxiety disorder.





# The Next Steps

There are lots of ways to treat or manage social anxiety disorder. Not every child responds in the same way to these treatments; it might be that some children require a combination of approaches to help them manage their symptoms.

## Counselling or Talking Therapy



Counselling encourages your child to talk about their anxiety and to understand what is making them anxious. By talking about it, they can find ways to work through stressful situations. You might get some activities to try at home with your child between sessions. Talking therapy can happen one-to-one or in small groups. It can be useful for your child to realise that other children also feel the same way.

## Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)



These sessions will happen with a therapist, who can help your child to notice the way they are thinking and behaving in social situations, then work on ways to change these negative thought patterns. As a parent or carer, you might be given some training and self-help materials in-between sessions.

## Medication



If your child's social anxiety is severe or isn't improving after sessions of talking therapy, they might be prescribed medication to help them manage their symptoms.





# What can I do to support my child?

## Talk and Ask for Help

Encourage your child to talk about their social anxiety. Keeping their thoughts and feelings bottled up can fuel the anxiety further. Reassure your child that they are not alone and no one is judging them. Seek help from local support groups and charities so you can meet other children and parents dealing with social anxiety.

## Understand Social Anxiety

Understand the anxiety by encouraging your child to think about it, write about it and draw it. They could keep a diary or a calendar to help them notice when they feel good and when the symptoms worsen.

## Practise Relaxation Techniques

Try some breathing techniques or slow movements that your child could do when they are feeling anxious. This is best done when your child is feeling fine! The more they practise when they're doing okay, the easier these techniques will be to employ when they are feeling anxious.

## Break It Down

Instead of talking about big challenges or situations that could cause anxiety (for example, a week of school performances or starting back at school), break these situations down into small, manageable steps. Focus only on the next thing; try not to look too far ahead. Encourage your child to do the same. By doing this, your child will hopefully see that they can overcome challenges one tiny step at a time.

## Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle

Anxiety can be worsened if your child is not getting enough sleep, is not exercising regularly or is not eating healthily. Try to model and maintain a healthy lifestyle and impress the importance of this on your child. Diet, exercise and sleep massively impact our physical and mental health.



# What can I do to support my child?

## Overcome Challenges

Do not avoid situations that make your child anxious. This may make them feel better in the moment but it only worsens their anxiety symptoms the next time they need to face the situation. Talk to them about the situation and find solutions together.

For example, if your child is anxious about a party, discuss how you could make the situation more manageable. Focus on the positives about the party. Could you reassure your child that the parent supervising the party can call you if your child needs support? Which friends will be there? Could you check what games will be played before the party, so you can practise together and ease any worries? Could you find out what food will be on offer so your child knows what to expect? If they feel more comfortable eating before or after the party, add this to the plan.

Having a 'get out' plan is often helpful for someone with social anxiety; a way out, if things get too overwhelming. Often, just knowing they have a way to escape can help a person with social anxiety relax a little more. You (and your child) don't want to miss out on these events - it's about learning to manage them so they are enjoyable.

## Set a Good Example

Do you experience social anxiety? It could be that your behaviours have influenced your child, so being aware of this and seeking support for your own symptoms is really important. It can be hugely beneficial to act as a mental health role model for your child. Talk about your own experiences of anxiety and model how to ask for help and manage the symptoms. If you're on top of your own anxiety disorder, your child is likely to be more willing to talk about their own challenges.

## Do Something Fun

It can be exhausting to constantly be battling with anxiety and facing challenges every day. What does your child love to do to relax? Maybe they rarely feel relaxed and you need to explore the possibilities. Do they like to watch films, play games, go for walks or spend time with animals? Discover what makes them feel at ease and build these calm, relaxing activities into your weekly routine. Having a fun activity in the diary can help motivate them to keep facing those difficult situations.

# What can I do to support my child?

## Take Time for You

Remember, you can't be there for your child if you don't take time for yourself. Look after your own physical and mental health to set a good example for your child. For example, plan relaxing activities, spend time with your loved ones and go on adventures, without your child. Taking time away from your child is essential for your own wellbeing; it can prevent you from feeling overwhelmed and allow you to replenish your energy.

Don't worry if you're feeling frustrated with your child's behaviour or finding things difficult - it's totally normal and every parent feels this way at some point. Social anxiety disorder is not easy to deal with, so make sure you seek out support. Look for groups that can offer advice and spend time chatting with other parents of socially anxious children. You are not alone!

## What do I do if my child has a panic attack?

A panic attack can be very distressing for both the person experiencing it and anyone witnessing it. Here are some tips for supporting your child during a panic attack:

- If appropriate, guide them to a safe place to sit or lay down.
- Encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply. You might have been practising some deep breathing techniques that you can draw upon.
- Remind them that it's okay for them to be feeling the way they are and that the attack will pass soon.
- It might help to play their favourite song, pop on their favourite audiobook, show them pictures that make them happy or play a video that calms them. Focus on positive, peaceful and relaxing things.
- Try to remain as calm as possible, to help your child realise that everything is okay. Remember, a panic attack is not life-threatening - it will pass and your child will be totally fine.
- If appropriate, return to the situation. Maybe your child had a panic attack at sports day - go back and show them that it's okay. Encourage them to get involved and overcome the challenge. Even just sitting and cheering on their team is a huge achievement; recognise these successes.



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