

Go-Slow Childhood

“Modern life is really putting pressure, usually invisible, on our children — especially sensitive children. Children’s brains are immature and unable to cope with the stressors of modern adult living and often misinterpret adult challenges as being about them or their fault. **Consistent stress becomes distress and the brain is seriously affected. Irrational behaviour, unstable emotions, sleeplessness and defiance are potential signs that a child is stressed, and struggling.**”

— Maggie Dent, *Saving Our Children from Our Chaotic World* (2003).

Hurried children are often stressed

Dr Stuart Shanker believes that kids vary how much “gas” or energy they have in coping with life. If a child is struggling with stress, abuse or feeling disconnected they will have less energy to learn, to think and to be happy.

According to Shanker’s six levels of energy, he says kids need to be at level four to be able to play, to concentrate and to learn.

1. Asleep
2. Drowsy
3. Hypoalert
4. **Calm, focused and alert**
5. Hyperalert
6. Flooded

Self-regulation is “regulation of the self by the self” (Baumeister & Vohs 2006)

What helps? Music, drama, art, sport, time in nature, safe touch, mindfulness, unstructured play, reading, caring relationships with consistent caregivers.

What doesn’t? TV, video games, Ipads, tablets, overstimulation, not enough warm human connectedness, too much pressure, poor food, lack of good quality sleep and stress on children.

— Source: Dr Stuart Shanker

Common symptoms of anxiety

- Complaints of stomach aches or headaches
- Sleep problems or difficulty concentrating
- Behavioural changes such as moodiness, a short temper or clinginess
- Development of a nervous habit, such as nail biting
- Refusal to go to school or getting into trouble at school
- Fussy eating

“So many grown ups can’t manage stress well because no-one helped them enough with stress and distress in childhood, they never set up effective stress regulating systems in the brains.” — Margot Sunderland, *The Science of Parenting* (2006).

Emotional Acupressure Release Points



“Happy, calm children learn best.” — Daniel Goleman

Anxiety is the most significant mental health issue in childhood, and yet it frequently goes undetected and untreated — it truly is a silent epidemic.

It can begin as early as age two but (like attention disorders) we see a significant rise when children enter the school system and many will go on to suffer anxiety their whole lives unless it’s addressed.

Dr Lynn Miller from the University of British Columbia has found that as well as common and known symptoms of anxiety (stomach aches, headaches, difficulty sleeping, avoiding school, nail biting and physical reactions such as increased heart rate or breathing), there are many frequently overlooked symptoms.

Frequently overlooked symptoms of anxiety

- Angry outbursts
- Oppositional and refusal behaviours
- Temper tantrums
- Aggression
- Attention-seeking behaviours
- Hyperactivity and difficulty sitting still
- Attention and concentration problems
- Scholastic underachievement or excessive resistance to doing work
- Frequent visits to school nurse
- High number of missed school days
- Difficulties with social or peer group.

Dr Miller says many anxious children who are misdiagnosed with other disorders are often medicated accordingly with drugs such as the much-discussed Ritalin.

The most common anxiety in small children is separation anxiety — which we all expect — and which usually kicks in at about six to eight months old in babies, but can last until a child is five years old or beyond. While separation anxiety is normal, it's important for parents of sensitive children to really be on the lookout for when it becomes excessive.

Symptoms of separation anxiety disorder include:

- Worry about harm coming to loved ones or separation due to bad event
- Persistent reluctance to go to preschool/school, to be alone, to be without adults or loved ones (eg. at home or when going to sleep)
- Repeated nightmares with themes of separation
- Physical complaints/symptoms when separated or anticipating separation
- Obvious distress.

Social anxiety is another common problem among children and particularly adolescents, where children might be overly shy or withdrawn, or worry excessively about what others might be thinking or saying about them.

Basically, whatever form it comes in, if your child's anxiety causes them to behave in ways that interfere with their day-to-day life and wellbeing or obstructs others, they may need help.

Benefits of silence and stillness

- Opens mind to creativity and better problem-solving
- Soothes the nervous system
- Builds emotional intelligence and competency
- Improves energetic fields both individually and in group
- Nurtures the inner world and the human spirit
- Builds resilience skills for life
- Improves ability and capacity to think

- Lessens fear — imagined or real
- Creates opportunity to "be" rather than "do"
- Helps sensory sensitive students to learn
- Allows auditory processors a chance to listen to their inner voices
- Slows reflection time – deeper thoughts have time to surface

*The brain cannot tell the difference
between real or imagined images.*

Top tips for reducing anxiety:

- Slow things down, leaving plenty of time for transition between activities.
- Have good routines particularly around eating and sleeping.
- Soothe your child with safe, loving touch and warmth – lots of cuddles, and rubbing the 'tickle point' at the base of their neck.
- Don't overschedule your children's lives, or put too much pressure on them to perform/achieve.
- Make time for silence and relaxation every day, even 10 minutes – research shows proven benefits for the whole family.
- For separation anxiety, help parents to make an effort to build 'love bridges' with kids: take a small bite out of their sandwich before placing it in the lunchbox; place kisses in their hands to hold onto all day; lay with them at night. Little things are big things to kids.
- In early years' educational environments try having family photo walls, give kids lanyards with photos from home, have hug bears, have special adult allies for kids struggling, use calming techniques, send rainbows, use digital devices recorded messages, video links, etc.

Calming activities can include meditation, laying down and listening to a cd of calming music or guided relaxation, or simply laying on the grass with the kids and listening to the sounds around you. Dedicating just 10 to 15 minutes a day to having a little more calm and connectedness in your centre or home is a great first step to helping for your anxious children.

Useful links for further reading and support:

[Anxiety Disorders Association of British Columbia \(Anxiety BC®\)](#)

[Anxiety Online Australia](#)

[Raising Children Network](#)

Read northjersey.com's series on how anxiety affects kids, their parents, friends and schools

[**www.maggiedent.com**](http://www.maggiedent.com)

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