**What is Social Anxiety?**

The idea that people might be paying particular attention to what you do makes a lot of kids anxious. Some kids feel so anxious that they develop something called [social anxiety disorder](http://childmind.org/article/quick-facts-on-social-anxiety/), which is diagnosed when you worry so much about how you appear to others that you stop doing things you need to (and want to) do for fear of embarrassing yourself.

Most people with the disorder start noticing this anxiety when they’re between the ages of 8 and 15. For a while, children are usually able to hide social anxiety disorder. Their parents and teachers may not notice that anything is wrong, especially since kids are often ashamed to admit how anxious they are about things that other people don’t seem to get upset about.

**Not just being shy**

Kids with social anxiety disorder aren’t just nervous when they’re at parties or giving a speech in class. “It’s not a phobia of being in social situations; it’s being terrified of how people are going to perceive you. Even small interactions, like answering a question in class or eating with friends in the cafeteria, can feel extremely scary to kids with social anxiety disorder. That’s because they fear they might accidentally do something embarrassing or offensive, and it will make others judge or even reject them.

And while kids who are just shy will gradually warm up to new people and situations over time, kids with social anxiety don’t. “Shyness might hold you back to some extent from doing things, but it won’t significantly impact your ability to do your job as a child or adolescent, which is to function in school, function in your family, and to have friends and be a part of your peer-related community.” But social anxiety will.

**Examples**

The kinds of situations that are anxiety-provoking can vary a lot depending on the person. Some kids with social anxiety mostly fear performing in front of people, while others are anxious in many situations—talking to a sales clerk, asking for help, eating or drinking in front of others. Here are some examples of what social anxiety might look like:

* You walk into the cafeteria and see your friends whispering and laughing. You’re afraid they’re laughing at you. Even when they promise they weren’t, you keep worrying.
* You love soccer and you want to try out for the team, but you don’t because you’re worried about people looking at you.
* You want to ask the teacher a question, but you can’t because you are afraid you will sound stupid.
* You agonize over taking a position in a paper you’re writing because you think it might be the “wrong” one.
* You dread reading out loud because you might pronounce something wrong or skip a word.

**What you feel—and what others see**

If you have social anxiety disorder, you probably think your anxiety is obvious for all to see—in fact, looking anxious is another thing kids with social anxiety are afraid of. But other people might not recognize it. That’s because a lot of the symptoms of anxiety are happening under the surface. You might be having panicked thoughts and feeling some of the physical symptoms of anxiety—like a racing heart or an upset stomach—but other people probably aren’t going to pick up on that. More visible signs like blushing can be a clue, but even blushing tends to be something people pay more attention to when it is happening to themselves.

Because kids with social anxiety disorder are afraid of doing anything that is embarrassing, they can be experts at hiding how they really feel.

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For other kids, their anxiety can make them seem angry or aggressive, like one boy Dr. Bubrick worked with. “Someone came up to him randomly and said, ‘I hear you want to see a picture of Sarah in a bikini.'” The boy was mortified and “went ballistic,” says Dr. Bubrick. “He was throwing papers, he kicked the principal. The school thought he was being oppositional, but underneath it all was this horrendous fear of being embarrassed.”

**Why avoiding anxiety doesn’t work**

One of the things that kids learn to do when they are anxious is to avoid the things that worry them—making excuses to stay home from school or skip parties or other social events. While this might work to calm your anxiety in the short term, experts warn that hiding from your anxiety really only makes it get worse. Besides, you’ll still need to learn how to do those things that at some point, and practicing them helps.

Another dangerous thing about avoiding fears is that it can become a habit, so you might find yourself withdrawing more and more. This will make your anxiety worse, and other people won’t understand why you are withdrawing. This can make you feel even more alone.

**Examples**

* You’re so worried about giving a presentation in school that you decide to cut class, because you’d rather take a lower grade than give your speech. Doing this makes the teacher think you don’t care about grades and are just doing the bare minimum to get by. Actually you care a lot about school but are paralyzed at the idea of getting in front of the class.
* You are becoming friends with your new lab partner and he keeps inviting you to play video games with him after school. You would like to go, but you’re afraid you’ll do something weird, so you keep coming up with excuses. Eventually he will start seeking you out less and less and assume you don’t want to be friends after all.

**Why it’s important to ask for help**

Having social anxiety can stop you from doing the things you want to do, and close you off from people you’d like to be friends with. It can also make you more likely to get depressed. Asking for help can be hard, but it really is important.

**Don’t avoid things**

Experts agree that avoiding situations that make us anxious can actually make things worse in the long run. “Getting out of something you didn’t want to do might make you feel better in the moment, but you will still feel anxious the next time you’re asked to do it.” And the things that make us anxious—talking to new people, giving presentations—aren’t going to go away.

**Push yourself**

While leaving your comfort zone isn’t easy, it can be very good for you. That’s because our anxiety tends to go away when we start doing the things that make us anxious. So when a situation comes up that makes you nervous, like walking into the cafeteria alone or asking someone to be your lab partner, try to face your fear and see what happens. “Chances are the worst outcome that you fear won’t happen. “And if it does, you might find you have the skills to handle it.”

**Practice**

As an experiment, try doing something that makes you nervous. It’s fine to start small and ease yourself into it. Picking goals that feel realistic to you is important—you don’t need to run for class president. If you think you might like to join a club, try just sitting in on a meeting at first. Or if you’d like to volunteer at the local animal shelter but you’re feeling nervous about it, start by bringing a friend or family member along for company.

**How Anxiety leads to disruptive behavior**

Disruptive behavior is often generated by unrecognized anxiety. A child who appears to be oppositional or aggressive may be reacting to anxiety—anxiety he may, depending on his age, not be able to articulate effectively, or not even fully recognize what he’s feeling.

“Especially in younger kids with anxiety you might see freezing and clinging kind of behavior, but you can also see tantrums and complete meltdowns.”

**A great masquerader**

Anxiety manifests in a surprising variety of ways in part because it is based on a physiological response to a threat in the environment, a response that maximizes the body’s ability to either face danger or escape danger. So while some children exhibit anxiety by shrinking from situations or objects that trigger fears, some react with overwhelming need to break out of an uncomfortable situation. That behavior, which can be unmanageable, is often misread as anger or opposition.

“Anxiety is one of those diagnoses that is a great masquerader. It can look like a lot of things. Particularly with kids who may not have words to express their feelings, or because no one is listening to them, they might manifest their anxiety with behavioral dysregulation.”

The more commonly recognized symptoms of anxiety in a child are things like trouble sleeping in his own room or separating from his parents, avoidance of certain activities, a behaviorally inhibited temperament. “Anyone would recognize those symptoms. But in other cases the anxiety can be hidden.

“When the chief complaint is temper tantrums, or disruption in school, or throwing themselves on the floor while shopping at the mall, it’s hard to know what it means. But it’s not uncommon, when kids like that come in to the ER, for the diagnosis to end up being a pretty profound anxiety disorder.”

**Problems at school**

It’s not uncommon for children with serious undiagnosed anxiety to be disruptive at school, where demands and expectations put pressure on them that they can’t handle. And it can be very confusing to teachers and other staff members to “read” that behavior, which can seem to come out of nowhere.

Anxiety is one of the causes of disruptive behavior that makes classroom teaching so challenging. “The trouble is that when kids who are anxious become disruptive they push away the very adults who they need to help them feel secure. Instead of learning to manage their anxiety, they end up spending half the day in the principal’s office.”

Dr. Rappaport sees a lot of acting out in school as the result of trauma at home. “Kids who are struggling, not feeling safe at home, can exhibit fairly intimidating kinds of behavior.” Most at risk are kids with ADHD who’ve also experienced trauma. “They’re hyper-vigilant, they have no executive functioning, they misread cues and go into combat.

**Giving kids tools to handle anxiety**

When a teacher is able to build a relationship with a child, to find out what’s really going on with him, what’s provoking the behavior, she can often give him tools to handle anxiety and prevent meltdowns. Kids can be taught to use strategies to calm themselves down, from breathing exercises to techniques for distracting themselves.

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“When a teacher understands the anxiety underlying the opposition, rather than making the assumption that the child is actively trying to make her miserable, it changes her approach, the teacher is able to join forces with the child himself and the school counselor, to come up with strategies for preventing these situations.”

If it sounds labor-intensive for the teacher, it is, but so is dealing with the aftermath of the same child having a meltdown.