



Coronavirus – anxiety and our children's ability to cope

As we begin to ease out of lockdown measures and schools and creches prepare to reopen, children may feel anxious about returning to social settings. In this article, Sheena Mitchell looks at some practical ways to support children and their parents over the coming weeks.

The pharmacist's role as a healthcare professional, and the skilled work of their pharmacy teams, have been further anchored deep within our communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our open doors and resilience have reassured our patients and our communities during a turbulent and threatening time. The informal setting of the community pharmacy allows patients to seek support that they may not have had the confidence or access to otherwise.

As our children return to playgrounds, social visits, sports, summer camps and eventually creche and school settings, many new questions or difficulties may arise, and we serve our communities best by being prepared to support them. The practical aspects of our 'new normal' and the emotional impacts of social isolation may manifest in some children as fear and anxiety. Whilst it is up to each family to guide their children through this unknown scenario, we are ideally placed to assist parents to recognise anxiety in their children, and to highlight different techniques and resources which may enable them to support their children.

Self-care for parents

One of the most important aspects in assisting our children to adapt to the challenges that COVID-19 raises within their daily lives is to encourage parents to take care of themselves too. Children have the incredible skill of translating their parent's feelings into their own reactive emotions. Encouraging parents to address their own fears and anxiety can therefore help to reduce the stress and worries that their children have. Panic and negativity can be contagious, and it is important to encourage parents to model the behaviour that they would like their children to absorb

and reflect. These challenging times have removed us abruptly from our comfortable routines and securities. Focusing on positivity and general good health may facilitate new outlooks, and adapted routines can be seen as an opportunity. Parents who are struggling to cope, lift their own moods and to stay in the moment may need to reach out for additional support if things begin to feel overwhelming. Finding time for yourself is really important for parents, and exceptionally difficult at the moment. Getting help to achieve this when possible should be prioritised. Online counselling supports should be highlighted to these parents and some examples include:

- Samaritans (jo@samaritans.ie)
- Pieta.ie
- Aware.ie
- Turn2Me.org
- Mymind.org
- Helplink.ie
- Barnardos
- Jigsaw
- Mindshift CBT App
- Headspace App

There are many techniques to encourage a calm and positive outlook in our lives such as meditation, exercise, a balanced diet and mindfulness. For the purposes of this article, I am going to focus on skills we can highlight to the parents of our communities to enable them to support their children during this age of uncertainty and change.

Childhood anxiety

Much of childhood anxiety is a normal part of growing up. Anxiety often begins in the early months and years when children become upset about separation from their parents. Developmental fears such as

phobia of insects, water and the dark arise and usually resolve themselves with time. What we are facing here in both the wake and midst of the COVID-19 pandemic is mostly unknown. Different families will have had very different experiences of 'lockdown' and it is hard to generalise the effect that their new environments may have on them. Some children will have noticed little difference in their lives pre and post COVID, remaining home in both scenarios. Some children will have been abruptly uprooted from all aspects of their normal routines with parents struggling to work without normal childcare arrangements. There are children who will have been exposed to media coverage of the virus and some who will have been cocooned from it. The impact of these varied experiences will be diverse and uncharted. Children, as individuals, will vary in their reactions to reduced social interactions and changed family dynamics. The only thing that is certain about all of these scenarios is that there is a big opportunity for anxiety in one form or another to have an impact on our children. How we identify, reduce and manage that anxiety is something that we do indeed have control over, and something that we, as pharmacy teams, can assist our communities with.

What are the signs of anxiety in children?

- Difficulty sleeping;
- Being irritable, clingy or tearful;
- Difficulty concentrating;
- Worrying about simple day-to-day tasks;
- Negative thoughts;
- Bed wetting;
- Bad dreams;
- Lack of interest in social visits or going out;

- Tantrums or meltdowns; and
- Psychosomatic complaints such as headaches, stomach aches etc.

How to help an anxious child?

- Talk and listen! Of course, you won't have solutions for every problem, but acknowledging them is half of the battle. Recognising your child's concerns and suggesting solutions when possible can be a big support, and if nothing else will help your child to feel heard, valued and reassured;
- Explaining the health advice to them, if they are old enough to understand, can empower your children to understand the restrictions and your choices as a family. There is no benefit to sheltering them completely from the truth. Parents can direct the narrative so that when children do hear about COVID-19, they have an age appropriate understanding and don't become alarmed;
- Start small and have realistic expectations. Building up to big events like a return to school can help. Suggest smaller group play dates with friends that your child knows and trusts. In any case, keeping groups small will reaffirm the rationale for social distance or whatever guidelines are in place at the time. Letting your child build confidence and self-esteem in social settings will have a very positive impact on managing anxiety;
- Avoid panic and anxiety as a parent by ensuring you are well prepared and on time and use distraction techniques on journeys to social gatherings such as the 'don't say yes or no' game, or who can spot the most red cars etc;

- Keeping to a daily routine can help children know what's coming and helps them to feel more secure. This is important for children of all ages;
- Preparing for the practical aspects of a return to social settings, such as awareness of social distance, the use of hand gel, not sharing toys, and regular hand washing can be really helpful. Practising the policies put in place by your school or creche setting at home before their return can help to reduce the fear and anxiety in the early weeks back;
- Teaching children breathing exercises can be a fantastic resource and skill for them. For younger children, let them imagine they are taking a deep breathe in and then blowing out a candle if they are worried. Older children can breathe in for three and out for three with their hand on their tummy to feel how it rises and falls. All of these things may sound simple, but it is important to teach a child relaxation techniques which they can use if they feel overwhelmed or worried;
- Some kids may benefit from giving their worries a character, and if they feel worried, they can practice reassuring that character in their mind by telling them to 'calm down, there is nothing to be afraid of';
- Praise positive behaviour as then it is more likely to be repeated;

“Children, as individuals, will vary in their reactions to reduced social interactions and changed family dynamics. The only thing that is certain about all of these scenarios is that there is a big opportunity for anxiety in one form or another to have an impact on our children.”

- Do activities your child is good at — promoting good self-esteem will improve overall outlook;
- Reduce treats and snacks and ensure regular exercise and down time. Bad habits can develop during stressful times, but healthy choices will benefit mental health and allow a more rational thought process;
- Create a worry box where they can store pictures or drawings of things that worry them and go through them once a week to discuss their concerns; and

- A gratitude jar can act similarly to a worry box but will allow your child to focus on the positives in their lives.

What if these techniques don't help?

If a child's anxiety is severe or is impacting their everyday life, and the above techniques don't help, it can be very useful to reach out for additional support. Encourage the parent to visit the GP. Also, speak about it with their creche or school so that they can monitor how the child is coping and provide additional support when needed.

With change now engulfing our lives, children have an opportunity to develop resilience. Parents need to reinforce and nurture this by caring for themselves as a starting point which enables a positive family dynamic. Focusing on the positives and living in the moment is essential for our physical and emotional wellbeing. We need to listen to our children's worries and lead by example, which recently takes much more self-reflection than ever before.

Sheena Mitchell is the owner manager of Milltown totalhealth Pharmacy, and also runs the WonderBaba website (www.wonderbaba.ie), where she blogs on all topics related to mother and baby.

