

***Anxiety in Children***  
by Burt Segal, LCSW  
Riverpoint Psychiatric Associates

During the past few years I have seen an alarming increase in Anxiety disorders among children. These days our kids have to contend with many pressures that did not exist when we were growing up. Terrorism is one example of these modern pressures. Our “post 9/11” world is a fact of life. The media inundates us with new bombings, somewhere in the world, on a daily basis. War casualties in the Middle East are now a part of the American fabric. This is more pronounced in our local community with the high concentration of military families.

If these aren’t enough for our children, they have to contend with the reality that local crime and shootings are all too frequent. A young boy I saw recently is having nightmares resulting from his fear that a stray bullet may kill him in the middle of the night. Other children worry that “bad guys” will break into their home and steal their belongings or hurt their family.

In addition to these fears our children have to contend with peer pressure to “fit in” by acting out, or by using cigarettes, drugs or alcohol at alarmingly early ages. Sexuality is rampant in our society due to the Internet, the traditional media and general desensitization to loosening moral standards in our modern society.

“Time pressure” is at an all time high. We are all trying to accomplish more in less time than ever before. The risks for adults are increased blood pressure, more physical ailments, greater marital conflicts and family turmoil. When we are pressured, we cannot help but pass this along to those around us and our children are not always equipped to handle this very well.

Children who are having difficulty with Anxiety will often talk about being “worried” or “afraid” of things. They may complain of more physical problems such as headaches or stomach aches. They may have difficulty sleeping at night, or their appetite may be affected. Children may act out behaviorally or refuse to go to school. In some cases children will begin to display ritualistic or obsessive/compulsive behaviors such as excessive hand washing, repeating certain movements or superstitious beliefs. All of these symptoms may be the result of possible problems with anxiety.

There are ways we can decrease the risk of our children being vulnerable to Anxiety disorders. Be aware of generational boundaries and keep them firm. Our children should not be concerned with adult issues, such as marital or financial problems. Keep the information you share with them on a “need to know” basis. Children do not need to be involved in the details of their parents’ disagreements.

Limit your child’s exposure to television and other media that portray the excessive violence of crime or war. It may also be important to balance all of the bad news in the media with the good things people are doing in the world. Monitor your child’s time on the computer. You should keep the computer in a public access area so you can casually walk by to review what they are doing. Also remember that many children know more about computers than we do. Do not hesitate to get help/technical support in setting parental controls on your computer to limit their access to inappropriate material.

Try to decrease time pressure by including more free time and shortening your “to do list” for the day. We all need time to relax and unwind. Try scheduling days in your home when you turn off the electronics totally. Enjoy a game of Monopoly or Scrabble as a family for a change. Your children may protest initially, but eventually they will look forward to these nights.

Finally, if you have done everything you can do to address your child’s concerns and they are still suffering from excessive worries and fears; seek professional assistance with these problems. Sometimes a few sessions of therapy can make a tremendous difference.