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### *When does anxiety become a disorder?*

An anxiety disorder is at the extreme end of the continuum of anxiety. It is a matter of severity rather than differences in features from normal anxiety. Some children progress to a “clinical” level of anxiety that merits a diagnosis. Yet, not all anxiety becomes a problem, and not all problem anxiety becomes a disorder. Children can display a wide variety and high number of anxiety *symptoms* without ever developing a *disorder*.

To be considered a disorder, anxiety must meet the four criteria described below:

- ❑ ***Disproportion***—The anxiety is excessive, unreasonable, and well out of proportion to the trigger or context. It is beyond normal expectations for the situation and child’s age. The child has an exaggerated sense of threat and danger, in situations where most people would not be concerned. The child is unable to stop or control the worry or fear, regardless of effort.
- ❑ ***Disruption***—The anxiety interferes substantially with the child’s ability to function normally. She is not able to accomplish things that she should be able to do to get through a normal day, such as go to school, do homework or sleep.
- ❑ ***Distress***—The child is distraught and easily upset. The anxiety is burdensome and bothersome to the child.
- ❑ ***Duration***—To meet criteria for a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder, a significant level of anxiety should be consistent over a period of time, usually a month.

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