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When does anxiety become a problem?

Parents and school personnel are often confronted with the challenge of deciding whether a child's anxiety is merely normal, expected and will be outgrown in due time, or whether it merits concern and intervention. The distinction and decision process can sometimes be straightforward and at other times be quite complex and challenging. Often, parents don't have a clear benchmark against which to assess their child's behavior, especially in the case of an only child or a first child.

Anxiety becomes a problem when it begins to affect a child's ability to engage in the three main responsibilities of childhood—to learn, to make friends and to have fun. For most children, fears and anxieties come and go with time and age. For some children, anxiety does not follow this expected course, and becomes severe and long lasting.

Anxiety extends on a continuum from normal and productive to excessive and detrimental. "Normal" anxiety in a child is that which appears to be age-expected, "justifiable" and reasonable to the circumstances. The following "Indicators of Problem Anxiety" reveal when anxiety crosses the threshold from normal to problematic. These rules of thumb are based on subjective judgments, which vary from one situation to the next.

Indicators of Problem Anxiety

<i>Normal Anxiety</i>	<i>Problem Anxiety</i>
Reasonable	Excessive
Productive	Detrimental
Manageable	Uncontrollable
Mobilizing	Paralyzing
Specific	Pervasive
Time-limited	Chronic
Age-matched	Age-mismatched

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Anxiety can cross the threshold from normal to problematic when children and adults encounter stress or major life events such as serious illness, death, or financial loss. For children, the loss of friends, a geographic move, change of schools, challenging academic requirements, tragic events, or parental divorce may be some triggers for problem anxiety. Adjustment-related anxiety may diminish when the stressor resolves.

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