

childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

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All our newsletters are now available for download from the website!

Special points of interest:

- * A great book for parents and teachers to read is, "Raising your anxious child" by R. Rapee and colleagues, 2001
- * To unsubscribe from this newsletter at any time, either email or call *childpsych*

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www.childpsych.net.au

Can Children be Neurotic?

Feature article by Philip Gosschalk MAPS, Principal and Psychologist of *childpsych*

The short answer is...Yes! But first we need to make sure we understand what "neurotic" means.

What is it?

Neuroticism is a personality trait that is characterised by a tendency to see things negatively. These are the "half glass empty" people. They are more pessimistic than optimistic. Such individuals tend to become worried and sad easily and are easily tired (from stress). They tend to come across as worriers, always looking for the negative in things, seem to have less fun, are critical of everything and have a tendency to think too much about something that upsets them.

How can we tell if a child is neurotic?

Neuroticism in children is identified in much the same way as in adults. These children do not like new situations, may be possessive of their friends, are self critical, worry a lot and are easily frightened and upset.

What are the consequences of neuroticism?

The usual outcome of this personality trait is that such children become *susceptible* to anxiety and depression. Note how being neurotic does not mean you will become depressed or anxious! It just means you are at increased risk of these prob-

lems. If such children are to develop anxiety and/or depression then the usual course is that anxiety develops first, with depression more likely in the adolescent years. Anxiety problems



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such as separation anxiety, obsessive and compulsive behaviours, excessive worrying and phobias tend to develop during the ages 6-12.

What can be done for these children?

Fortunately, there are a variety of things we can do. Helping the child to develop a good support network through quality friendships is a good start.

1. Social support. To start with the research suggests that a strong sense of family and good quality friendships can "buffer" or reduce the chances of anxiety or depression developing. This makes sense as the support of friends and family helps us to get through stressful times. After all too much stress is usually what brings on anxiety and depression in neurotic individuals. So it makes sense that we need to help these children cope with stress in their lives. In fact, having one good quality friend is

more important than being popular with their peers! Therefore, one thing we can do is get such children involved in clubs where they are likely to meet like-minded children. It doesn't matter if the club is sporting or the local computer gamers group - so long as they have an opportunity to make quality best friends.

2. Quality friends. So what is a good quality best friend? Well someone the child has the same interests as, listens to their problems, sticks up for them, does not talk about them behind their back and does not argue with them.

3. Keeping friends. The only problem is that neurotic children tend to have trouble keeping their friends. They tend to be less skilled at fixing their friendship problems, tend to over react emotionally to problems with their peers (eg., storming off in a huff) and be less assertive. Therefore, neurotic children need to learn not just how to make friends, but how to KEEP them! They need to learn skills like how solve a problem between them and their friends and how to react appropriately when upset with their friends.

Is it as simple as teaching the child social skills?

Teaching social skills is less than a quarter of the

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“ It appears that such children need to be taught how to be optimistic”

Can children be neurotic? con't

solution but is still important. It appears that such children need to be taught how to be optimistic as well as how to physically calm themselves when upset.

The key to success appears however, to be teaching neurotic children how to be more resilient and positive. This is NOT the same as telling yourself every day you are a wonderful person. Rather, such children need to learn how to think more rationally, not dwell on things so much and to control their emotions better. At *childpsych* we use cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT) to do this.

What can parents do?

- * Show children how you see the brighter side of life in negative things
- * Don't use negative labels such as "Tom's the whinger in our family"
Celebrate achievements and don't down play them
- * Don't over praise your child for everything either, acknowledge their failures and help them learn from each one

Further Reading

M. Seligman (1995). The optimistic child. Houghton: NY



Parenting Anxious Children

How parents react to anxious children is crucial for the child's ability to overcome anxiety. At *childpsych* the emphasis is on helping children to be interdependent. Interdependent means "relying on yourself where possible but also drawing on the strength of others".

If parents are to help their child become more interdependent in their ability to manage anxiety, then the amount of reassurance a parent engages in, their level of protectiveness and the consistency of how they respond to the child's anxiety should be considered.

It is a natural instinct for a parent to reassure their child when the child is anxious. For example, if a storm is raging outside the house and Little Billy becomes fearful the house will blow down, Billy may settle if mum tells him the wind isn't strong enough to blow the house down. However, if Little Billy is an anxious boy, then telling him the wind isn't strong enough only serves to keep him reliant upon his mother to make him feel better. He will never learn to think for himself or think calmly about things that upset him because he needs his mother (or father) to think for him. As you can see it is quite tricky. What might be okay for

one child, isn't for another. Learning how to respond to an anxious child is what we help parents with at *childpsych* - we don't just work solely with the child.

To help parents learn how to respond to an anxious child we teach the child AND parent how to engage in rational/calm thinking. This basic approach is based on what's called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and has received considerable research support.

As well as learning how to refrain from excess reassurance, it is important to look at how protective parents are. I recently worked with a lovely family where the parents were very worried about their child walking home

from school. Unfortunately, the child was getting the implicit message that "the world isn't safe" and "you're not ready to protect yourself". As part of the intervention, we looked at how to determine when mum and dad were being over-protective and when they weren't. That child now walks to school happily with other friends and is a much less anxious child.

The focus at *childpsych* is about giving parents the skills and knowledge to manage their child's difficulties. In essence, parents are taught to be co-therapists!

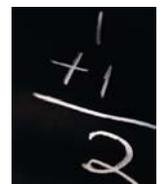


Language Skills and Mathematics

When people think of mathematics they often think of what's called "non-verbal cognitive skills" such as visual memory. Certainly, mathematics is an academic area that requires little language skills compared to reading and so on. However, a recent study investigated the importance of language in about 7000 children. Their study showed that the ability to use language and acquire knowledge

was the best predictor for how well a child would do in mathematics reasoning and mathematics calculations. So language understanding is important for learning simple math as well as learning how to problem solve. This may be because when children understand what mathematics is, rather than just ROTE learning, they are more likely to continue to understand new math taught to them. Good

teachers have known this for years and talk about "a number sense" as well as teaching children the "language of mathematics". For example, a child needs to know that "more than", "three more than one" and "how many more" all mean that addition (+) should be used. This finding is also relevant for high school children.




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helping families and children to move forward