

NO MORE WORRIES

Dealing with kids' mental health at Markham Stouffville Hospital

Childhood is often thought of as an idyllic time without a worry or care in the world. But the reality is not as rosy.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, it is estimated that 10 to 20 per cent of Canadian youth are affected by mental illness or disorder, of which anxiety is one of the most common.

Anxious children often experience a sense of unease or feelings of being threatened. Anxiety may cause children to complain of frequent stomach aches, rapid heart rate or dizziness even though a doctor's examination reveals nothing wrong. The fear may also cause them to have trouble sleeping or refuse to go to school. And if anxiety goes unchecked, children may begin to feel powerless and overwhelmed, affecting the quality of their life.

What are parents to do when they see their children struggling?

At Markham Stouffville Hospital, a team of professionals specializing in children's mental health offers a number of unique programs, whether a child needs short-term care or long-term follow-up.

One of the hospital's innovative programs that specifically addresses anxiety in children is called Worry Busters, developed by social workers Maria Iosue and Susan Russell nine years ago. While children may feel anxious at different times of the year, Iosue and Russell tend to see a spike in referrals during the fall.

"School can create significant anxiety in children because it puts a lot of pressure on them, whether it's being accepted by their peers or the academic expectations of their teachers and parents," Iosue says.

The Worry Busters program, which runs during the school year, accepts children up to and including age 13. Fathers and mothers — or other significant caregivers — must also make a commitment to attend three separate sessions to understand their role in helping their children, Russell says.

During the program, the children start off with 30 minutes of yoga, which helps them to unwind from a hectic day and focus on their bodies and feelings.

"We find that yoga allows them to relax and be more present in the group and ready to grasp the concepts of the program," Iosue says.

At the beginning, participants learn to identify where they feel fear, whether it's in their stomach, neck, back or shoulders.

"Most children have difficulty verbalizing what they're going through," Iosue says.

But after they isolate that place of fear, they learn how to describe what they experience as a physical sensation.

They may say it's like a fiery dragon in their stomach or their neck freezes up like an ice cube.

Once they have an image, the children are encouraged to make a sculpture out of clay representing what their anxiety looks like. The sculpture allows the children to put some distance between themselves and the anxiety, Iosue says, so they can start to address it.

Iosue and Russell take the participants through a four-step process that helps them manage and cope with their difficult situations. After they have identified their frightening feelings, they learn how they think in anxious situations. If there is a test at school, they may harbour negative thoughts, believing that they won't do well or that they will fail.

To counter that anxiety, the children are given new positive messages to practise, such as "I'm going to do OK," or "I'm going to pass."

When they report back to the group on their success, the children are encouraged to reward themselves in a small or big way, such as congratulating themselves, doing something they love to do, or planning a special outing. With their

new-found confidence, they slowly gain mastery over their anxiety, Iosue says.

Parents, too, play a pivotal role in helping their children learn how to manage their anxiety.

"We explain different parenting approaches and provide learning opportunities to help parents stay grounded in the face of their children's problems," Russell says.

During the three sessions, parents — or significant caregivers, be it a grandmother, uncle or close family friend — learn about childhood anxiety and good parenting approaches. They may realize ways they have contributed to their children's anxiety, for example, by being overprotective.

"If, by the age of 12, children are still relying on their parents too much, we help the children and parents break the cycle in a compassionate way," Russell says.

She adds that children need to be allowed to handle their own problems.

"We also notice that parents become open to looking at how they deal with their own stress and worries," Russell says.

In applying the basics of the program to their personal lives, they become better at supporting their children.

By the end of the program, parents are amazed at the differences they see in their children.

"They tell us that they see their children in a new light, that they experience a totally different child," Iosue says.

Similarly, the children have learned to recognize stress in their parents.

"Some of the kids have told us that they tell their moms to breathe, or notice when their dads are stressed out."

The success rate of Worry Busters is exceptional. After participating in the program, for which a doctor's referral is required, a great majority of children are able to cope with their anxiety on their own.

"We rarely see any of the participants return," Russell says.

CHILDREN AND ANXIETY

Anxiety is a common — and normal — experience for most humans, young and old. The good news is that anxiety can be managed, as long as it is recognized and talked about. So what do the signs of anxiety in children look like? And what should a parent do about it?

Anxious children tend to worry: You may hear your child say things like, "What if I fall down in the playground and everybody laughs at me?" or "What if I make mistakes on my math test?" These kinds of constant concerns are common in anxious children.

Anxious children tend to avoid situations: Your child may talk about not wanting to eat with the rest of the kids in the lunchroom, or refusing to go to school, complaining of frequent stomach aches. Avoidance of situations occurs often in anxious children.

Anxious children tend to need a lot of reassurance: Even though you have never been late picking your son up from school, he may ask you every day if you will be on time. Similarly, your daughter may often ask if the kids at school like her. These kinds of questions are repeated, even though your child has had ample evidence that all is well.

If your child has been exhibiting any of these signs, sit down with them and talk about fears and how common they are for everybody. Tell them they will be OK and that the fears will pass. Stay calm.

If, however, you find you are having difficulty helping your child with their anxiety, or they become immobilized by their fears, talk to your health-care provider.



Social workers Maria Iosue, left, and Susan Russell are co-facilitators of Worry Busters, which deals with children's mental health issues, at Markham Stouffville Hospital. Nick Kozak photo

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