



## **Mental Health America of Franklin County**

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# **Anxiety Disorders and Children**

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An anxiety disorder is a mental health problem that can affect people of all ages, including children. In fact, anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health disorder in children, affecting as many as ten percent of young people.

All children experience some anxiety; this is normal and expected. For example, when left alone at preschool for the first time, many children will show distress; a young child with his or her own room may develop a fear of the dark. Such anxiety becomes a problem when it interrupts a child's normal activities, like attending school and making friends or sleeping. Persistent and intense anxiety that disrupts daily routine is a mental health problem that requires intervention.

### **What Are the Most Common Anxiety Disorders in Children?**

There are several types of anxiety disorders. The list below describes those most common to children.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder — Children with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) have recurring fears and worries that they find difficult to control. They worry about almost everything—school, sports, being on time, even natural disasters. They may be restless, irritable, tense, or easily tired, and they may have trouble concentrating or sleeping. Children with GAD are usually eager to please others and may be “perfectionists,” dissatisfied with their own less-than-perfect performance.

Separation Anxiety Disorder — Children with separation anxiety disorder have intense anxiety about being away from home or caregivers that affects their ability to function socially and in school. These children have a great need to stay at home or be close to their parents. Children with this disorder may worry excessively about their parents when they are apart from them. When they are together, the child may cling to parents, refuse to go to school, or be afraid to sleep alone. Repeated nightmares about separation and physical symptoms such as stomachaches and headaches are also common in children with separation anxiety disorder.

Social Phobia — Social phobia usually emerges in the mid-teens and typically does not affect young children. Young people with this disorder have a constant fear of social or performance situations such as speaking in class or eating in public. This fear is often accompanied by physical symptoms such as sweating, blushing, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, or muscle tenseness. Young people with this disorder typically respond to these feelings by avoiding the feared situation. For example, they may stay home from school or avoid parties. Young people with social phobia are often overly sensitive to criticism, have trouble being assertive, and suffer from low self-esteem. Social phobia can be limited to specific situations, so the adolescent may fear dating and recreational events but be confident in academic and work situations.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder — Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) typically begins in early childhood or adolescence. Children with OCD have frequent and uncontrollable thoughts (called “obsessions”) and may perform routines or rituals (called “compulsions”) in an attempt to eliminate the thoughts. Those with the disorder often repeat behaviors to avoid some imagined consequence. For example, a compulsion common to people with OCD is excessive hand washing due to a fear of germs. Other common compulsions include counting, repeating words silently, and rechecking completed tasks.

In the case of OCD, these obsessions and compulsions take up so much time that they interfere with daily living and cause a young person a great deal of anxiety.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder — Children who experience a physical or emotional trauma such as witnessing a shooting or disaster, surviving physical or sexual abuse, or being in a car accident may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Children are more easily traumatized than adults. An event that may not be traumatic to an adult—such as a bumpy plane ride—might be traumatic to a child. A child may “re-experience” the trauma through nightmares, constant thoughts about what happened, or reenacting the event while playing. A child with PTSD will experience symptoms of general anxiety, including irritability or trouble sleeping and eating. Children may exhibit other symptoms such as being easily startled.

### **What Can Parents and Caregivers Do?**

By identifying, diagnosing and treating anxiety disorders early, parents and others can help children reach their full potential. Anxiety disorders are treatable. Effective treatments for anxiety disorders may include some form of psychotherapy, behavioral therapy, or medications. Children who exhibit persistent symptoms of an anxiety disorder should be referred to and evaluated by a mental health professional who specializes in treating children. The diagnostic evaluation may include psychological testing and consultation with other specialists. A comprehensive treatment plan should be developed with the family, and, whenever possible, the child should be involved in making treatment decisions.

**To learn more, talk to a doctor or mental health professional, contact your local Mental Health America or access the resources below:**

Mental Health America, 800-969-6642, [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)  
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)  
American Psychiatric Association, 888-357-7924, [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)  
American Psychological Association, 800-964-2000, [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)  
Anxiety Disorders Association of America, 240-485-1001, [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)  
Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 800-233-4050, [www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org)  
Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health, 703-684-7710, [www.ffcmh.org](http://www.ffcmh.org)  
Freedom From Fear, 888-442-2022, [www.freedomfromfear.com](http://www.freedomfromfear.com)  
Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation, 203-315-2190, [www.ocfoundation.org](http://www.ocfoundation.org)  
Head Start Mental Health Resources, 866-763-6481, [www.headstartinfo.org](http://www.headstartinfo.org)  
Knowledge Exchange Network, 800-789-2647, [www.mentalhealth.org](http://www.mentalhealth.org)  
National Association of School Psychologists, 301-657-0270, [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

**Mental Health America of Franklin County** is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We help people navigate the mental health system. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; free support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; Pro Bono Counseling Program where underinsured and uninsured individuals can receive free counseling; community and professional mental health education including Get Connected; maternal mental health support and advocacy (POEM); and a quarterly newsletter featuring legislative updates and new happenings at MHAFC. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board, United Way of Central Ohio, individuals, foundations, and corporations. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at [www.mhafc.org](http://www.mhafc.org).