



# Stopping Childhood

# ANXIETY

## Before It Starts

ARE YOUR KIDS AT RISK? CHECK YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

**A**LTHOUGH IT'S PERFECTLY normal for children to worry sometimes, it's not always harmless. One in 10 children ages 5 to 16 suffers from an anxiety disorder, compared with one in 20 children who has the more widely known attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

General anxiety disorder (GAD) is a diagnosable illness in children. "These are the kids who are the worriers," says Golda Ginsburg, Ph.D., a professor and child psychologist at Johns Hopkins. "They worry about safety, making friends, school performance. It's chronic, severe and difficult to control." Ginsburg says these children seek a lot of reassurance, but reassurance doesn't reduce the anxiety.

Untreated anxiety can cause developmental problems in children because it often interferes with sleep, prevents them from going places, and affects their interaction with others.

GAD is far more common in children than panic disorder, which occurs when a

child has panic symptoms such as a racing heartbeat, difficulty breathing and a feeling of loss of control. And experts know GAD can run in families. "All anxiety disorders have a biological and environmental component," Ginsburg says.

That's one reason Johns Hopkins researchers are focusing on stopping anxiety before it starts by studying the children of parents who have been diagnosed with the disorder. Prevention is key, Ginsburg says.

"If it's at the disorder level," she adds, "then treatment is needed."

To treat children suffering from anxiety, doctors generally will use cognitive behavioral therapy or medication, or both. A 2008 study by Johns Hopkins researchers showed that combination therapy was most effective, with 80 percent of combination-treated children showing improvement; in a more recent study, however, symptoms improved but in many cases the illness didn't go away entirely. ■

## How Do I Know If My Child Has Anxiety?

Pay attention to three clues that your child may have higher-than-normal levels of anxiety or worry:

- 1 Severity.** How out of proportion is the worry to the problem?
- 2 Frequency.** How often does your child worry? Is it every day and repeatedly without diminishing?
- 3 Interference and avoidance.** Is worrying impairing your child's life in a significant way, causing significant distress and keeping him or her from enjoying activities or going places?



If you are struggling with anxiety and are concerned that your child could suffer from it, too, Johns Hopkins is seeking participants for a clinical trial on prevention strategies for childhood anxiety. Call **443-287-4349** or email [caps@jhmi.edu](mailto:caps@jhmi.edu) for more details.