

Don't worry, baby

Anxiety in children and adults is on the rise, so it's not unusual for parents to wonder if their baby is showing worrisome signs for the future. CASEY MCPIKE discovers what kind of behaviour is simply a normal developmental stage, and what needs to be taken more seriously

Medical advancements mean parents can find out detailed information about their baby well in advance of their due date, if they so choose. But the question many parents ponder more than any other can't be answered by screenings and scans: "What will my baby be like? Relaxed, highly strung, friendly, moody, a chatterbox, serious, funny, nervous, outgoing, volatile, a little charmer?" Raising a baby into a well-adjusted and confident child is high on the parental wish list.

Anxiety in babies and toddlers

When a child has reached the age of six or seven, anxiety is easier to diagnose as the traits can be more easily pinpointed. Babies and toddlers aren't so straightforward. As clinical psychologist Dr Cate Hey explains, "Anxiety isn't typically a term we apply to babies. Babies and toddlers are thought to have temperament (which later is described as personality). Some babies may be observed to have a 'slow to warm up' temperament style, and display what looks like anxious behaviour, but we wouldn't say they're 'suffering from anxiety'".

What causes anxiety?

"Anxiety has both genetic and environmental components. If there is anxiety in the family, then it's

something to be aware of as your child grows. As the genetic component can't be avoided, it's helpful to work on not transferring anxiety through parental worry and environmental factors," says Dr Hey.

For many babies and toddlers, feeling anxious or upset is a temporary response to a situation they're in right at that moment. Overstimulation, people around them behaving erratically, too much attention from strangers, or thinking they're being left or ignored by their parent/regular caregiver can trigger a meltdown.

Sometimes, what we might view as an anxious reaction is simply a developmental stage. As Dr Hey points out, "Babies can display behaviours such as startle responses (where they fling their arms out and cry) in reaction to hearing a loud noise or being put down, which is a reflex rather than a display of anxious behaviour."

It's important to note that if you suffer from anxiety yourself, and/or if your baby displays what appears to be anxious behaviour, it doesn't necessarily mean they'll develop into an anxious child.

Separation anxiety

This type of anxiety is a very normal developmental milestone, usually kicking in between six to twelve months of age. Many parents are flummoxed when their social butterfly baby who had a smile for everyone suddenly screams the walls down at the mere hint →

CAN ANXIETY BE 'CURED'?

"ANXIETY CAN BE REDUCED AND MANAGED, BUT USUALLY NOT ELIMINATED. COPING SKILLS LEARNT AT AN EARLY AGE CAN BE VERY USEFUL TO HELP REDUCE ANXIETY IN YOUNG CHILDREN. OFTEN THESE CHILDREN MIGHT HAVE OTHER ANXIETIES THAT DEVELOP AT LATER STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT, SO SKILLS NEED TO BE RE-VISITED OR NEW SKILLS LEARNT AS THE CHILD GETS OLDER."

Dr Cate Hey

of being left. When your baby realises that you are a loved and needed individual in their world, they worry that you might not be coming back when they can't see you. As difficult as it is to wave goodbye to a tear-stained little face, try to feel reassured that most babies settle within 5-10 minutes of being handed over.

If the anxiety starts to grow...

Any displays of behaviour from your child that worry you are worth talking to your doctor about. Dr Hey advises, "Always talk to your GP (or Plunket) first to rule out any physiological/medical aspects that could be contributing to your child's behaviour before going down the path of considering anxiety." While it's technically still early days in terms of personality development, some of the more common red flags that you should raise with your doctor include:*

- * Fears and phobias that take over their life (and yours), over and above the usual mild worries about monsters under the bed or being wary of bugs
- * Needing an extremely rigid routine to function, and/or insisting on rituals
- * Heightened sensitivity to noise, or to clothes (e.g. losing the plot about labels, seams, or anything that feels restrictive)
- * Avoiding all situations where they might get messy hands
- * Taking picky eating to the next level, perhaps eating only a very limited number of foods, and gagging or reacting hysterically if they experience an unexpected texture
- * Excessively shadowing their parent/caregiver, and having complete meltdowns if they can't see you for a moment, even in their own home
- * Trouble with sleeping, wanting a parent to always lie down with them to fall asleep, and waking through the night feeling scared.

(*Source: *Natasha Daniels, How To Parent Your Anxious Toddler*)

Calling in the professionals

Realising that your child needs tools from a psychologist to help them navigate their feelings can seem overwhelming, but it doesn't need to be. Dr Hey explains the process: "Your GP can give you a referral for a clinical psychologist, or you may choose to find one on the advice of a childcare service or friend who has been in a similar situation. Often the clinical psychologist will request to see parents first to assess the areas of concern, including looking at developmental, social, learning and health issues. Appointments may then

be conducted with the child and parents, or the child on their own."

Tips for easing the ride

If your baby is crying incessantly, hold them closely to your chest while speaking in a gentle, soothing tone to reassure them. If you're unable to hold them (if you're driving, for example), try giving them something soft that has been close to your skin, such as a scarf. Your familiar scent may help to calm them down until you can pick them up. With toddlers, crouch down to their eye level as you reassure them.

Most babies and toddlers – especially sensitive ones – thrive on a basic routine. Knowing what to expect next can breed familiarity and a sense of security. Their world is a small one, and it takes a while to learn how to cope with surprises. Try to remember to explain to them what is happening in their day as you move from one activity or place to the next, even if they seem too little to understand you.

To alleviate separation anxiety, allow plenty of time for your little one to get familiar with their caregiver before you leave. You can also try distracting with a new toy or one they haven't seen for a while just before you say goodbye. When dropping off at childcare, follow the same 'goodbye routine' each day (e.g. settling them into an activity, kissing goodbye, waving from the doorway) and then don't hang around chatting to other parents or teachers. It can be upsetting for babies and small children if they think you've gone then see you again. Fake your own confidence if you're feeling wobbly about leaving them, and don't sneak out without saying goodbye or they may become more upset looking for you.

As much as possible, try to stay calm when you feel anxious or stressed yourself. Babies and toddlers are intuitive, and will take their emotional cues from you. If you shriek and run away from a spider, they'll learn that spiders are something to be feared. If you're rushing around and speaking loudly because the family is running late or you're upset about something, they'll take the hint that now is the time to freak out (which explains why the more frantic you are, the bigger their meltdown). As Dr Hey says, "How parents respond to their own stress is important. Parents need to encourage their children to survive and deal with stressful situations to give them a framework for later life." Demonstrating that you have your own calming down techniques – for example taking deep breaths – sets an example to follow. ■

Dr Cate Hey is a registered clinical psychologist practising in Auckland.

COMMON SIGNS

your little one is feeling anxious

Hysterical crying

Some babies may vomit from the exertion of crying – it's more common than you might expect!

Clinging

Some will typically cling and bury their face into their parent/caregiver

Wakefulness

Your usually solid sleeper may not want to be put to bed, and may wake several times during the night wanting to be with you.

Regular Kids



Because little systems don't always work like clockwork.

Babies and toddlers may suffer from constipation, for a variety of reasons. Formula feeding, starting on solid food, or toilet training can all make them less 'regular'. Coloxyl® infant drops is a gentle stool softener, especially for infants and young children up to three years' old, that provides effective relief within 12 to 24 hours.

Ask your pharmacist for Coloxyl® Infant Drops for gentle relief that works like clockwork.

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