

# Signs of Anxiety in Young Kids

By Lexi Walters Wright

It's not unusual for kids, even young ones, to sometimes feel anxious. But how do you know if anxiety is a problem for your child? It can be confusing.

You might see some anxious behaviors even when kids don't have an anxiety problem. So they may not jump out as signs, unless they happen a lot or interfere with everyday life. For example, not wanting to eat lunch at school or being grouchy for no reason could be caused by all kinds of things, or by nothing at all.

If you're wondering if your preschooler or grade-schooler may be struggling with anxiety, here are signs you might see, according to John Piacentini, PhD, and Lindsey Bergman, PhD, experts from the UCLA Child Anxiety Resilience Education and Supports (CARES) Center.

## Physical Signs of Anxiety

- Often complains of headaches or stomachaches, even though there's no medical reason for them
- Refuses to eat snacks or lunch at daycare or school
- Won't use bathrooms except at home
- Is restless, fidgety, hyperactive, or distracted (even without having ADHD)
- Starts to shake or sweat in intimidating situations
- Constantly tenses muscles
- Has trouble falling or staying asleep

## Emotional Signs of Anxiety

- Cries a lot
- Is very sensitive
- Becomes grouchy or angry without any clear reason
- Is afraid of making even minor mistakes
- Has panic attacks (or is afraid of having panic attacks)
- Worries about things that are far in the future, like worrying about starting middle school in third grade
- Is worried or afraid during drop-offs (at daycare, school, relatives' homes, etc.)
- Has frequent nightmares about losing a parent or loved one

## Behavioral Signs of Anxiety

- Asks "what if?" constantly ("What if an earthquake happened?")
- Avoids joining in during class activities like circle time
- Remains silent or preoccupied when expected to work with others
- Refuses to go to school
- Stays inside alone at lunch or recess

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- Avoids social situations with other kids, like birthday parties or extracurricular activities
- Constantly seeks approval from parents and caregivers, teachers, and friends
- Says “I can’t do it!” without a real reason
- Has meltdowns or tantrums

To find out what might be causing anxiety, observe your child and take notes on what you’re seeing. You can download and fill out an anxiety log to track patterns in your child’s behavior. Then share it with your child’s teacher and doctor, and talk about next steps.

Keep in mind that anxiety is common in kids who struggle in school. Ask your child’s teacher if your child is having any learning or behavior challenges. And find out from the doctor whether your child’s anxiety is something you should look into. There are many types of emotional support for kids with anxiety.

## About the Author

Lexi Walters Wright is the former Community Manager at Understood ([u.org/community](https://www.understood.org)). As a writer and editor, she helps parents make more informed choices for their children and for themselves.

## Reviewed by

John Piacentini, PhD, is a professor of psychiatry and director of the UCLA Child Anxiety Resilience Education and Support (CARES) Center.

<https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/managing-feelings/stress-anxiety/signs-your-young-child-might-be-struggling-with-anxiety>