



A NEIGHBOURS FEATURE ON WHAT MATTERS TO CALGARY FAMILIES



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Tantrums in children may stem from generalized anxiety disorder, which often goes undiagnosed.

Anxiety may be root of child's temper tantrums

By Wendy Zak
For Family Matters

Childhood is perhaps the most carefree time of our lives, but when healthy and normal stress starts to manifest itself in behaviour problems, parents may need to uncover the real issue of anxiety in their children.

"When these worries interfere with a child's ability to function normally, this is called an anxiety disorder," says Kelly Moroz, a certified child psychologist in Calgary.

In some cases, these disorders are so severe the child is clearly in need of professional help, as in the case of extreme phobias or post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Equally common, though, is less severe "generalized anxiety," which Moroz calls a hidden disorder.

"Often this anxiety manifests itself in behavioural problems that one might not associate with anxiety — behaviours such as tantrums, perfectionism, over-sensitivity and obstinacy. Other behaviours, such as obsessive hand-washing, may be carried out in secret."

These cases often remain undiagnosed.

Debbie, who did not want to be identified, talks of her son, who had exhibited behavioural problems even as a baby. She and her husband had tried unsuccessfully to combat whining,

tantrums and almost zero tolerance for frustration in their son.

"Most of the strategies we found had a band-aid effect," she says. "His behaviour might improve, but he didn't seem any happier." Finally, the couple realized anxiety was the core problem, and his actions were just symptoms.

"Once the anxiety was dealt with, it was amazing how the other issues seemed to sort themselves out," she says.

Unfortunately, situations like this are very common, and many children don't receive the help they need. Solutions that worked in this boy's case were as simple as learning some basic relaxation techniques, and a technique that Moroz calls "What if."

The technique encourages a child to try and imagine the worst that can happen. Parents then help him to realize the worst case scenario is probably quite unlikely and that the probable consequences are not that bad.

"Children often cannot articulate their emotions and may not even understand them," says Robin Wetherley, a clinical psychologist in Calgary, who, like Moroz, finds play therapy an important tool. "Even though parents and teachers are a vital link in discovering what is bothering a child, sometimes unexpected concerns emerge during play."

Wetherley cites an example of one child of divorced parents who refused

to visit her father. The parents speculated as to what the problem could be, but the child was only able to express the real reason during a game. They discovered that, because the father had moved to a house in the country, the girl was afraid she would have to walk home alone in the dark after each visit. This would have been an unimaginable scenario for her parents, but to the child it was a real and horrific possibility. Once it was uncovered, the parents were able to reassure the little girl and resolve the problem.

A common misconception is that children will outgrow their anxieties. Moroz says this is rarely the case — most children carry these anxieties into adulthood. As their problems become larger, their ability to deal with them diminishes.

A child's fears should never be minimized, say the psychologists. Telling a child not to worry will only cause her to internalize the fear and cause more emotional conflict.

If you think your child may be suffering from anxiety, visit your family doctor to rule out any physiological problems, and to ask about community programs. If the problem persists, you can have your child assessed by a certified psychologist such as Moroz or Wetherley. If anxiety is discovered to be the problem, professionals can be very helpful in teaching relaxation and coping techniques.