

Early screening for anxiety disorders in children helps prevent mental health concerns: study

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A University of British Columbia researcher has developed a simple two-question test to screen kindergarten-aged children for future anxiety disorders - the most commonly reported mental health concern among children.

The screening questions, which ask parents about shyness, anxiety and worrying in their [children](#), were found to be 85 per cent effective in identifying children who went on to be clinically diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

"When children enter kindergarten, they are screened for hearing and vision problems and difficulty reading so that these issues can be identified and treated early," says Lynn Miller, an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at UBC who is presenting this research at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting in Vancouver. "It only makes sense to screen for anxiety at this age too."

Miller evaluated three questions in a study of 200 [kindergarten children](#) from the Lower Mainland. The two questions that Miller found to be most effective in identifying [anxiety disorders](#) in children are:

1. Is your child more shy or anxious than other children his or her age?

2. Is your child more worried than other children his or her age?

One in ten children is affected by a [mental health disorder](#) and the majority are anxiety disorders. Anxiety is associated with a number of psychological and educational difficulties such as impaired peer and [family relationships](#), school avoidance, greater rates of depression, increased rates of alcohol and [tobacco use](#), and development of related anxiety disorders.

"The good news is that anxiety disorders are among the easiest to treat and the best way to treat these disorders is when kids start school," says Miller, of the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education.

Miller explains that parents, teachers and community members can teach children how to cope with anxiety in four steps.

Children are first taught to identify when they're feeling anxious. They are taught a variety of techniques to cope with anxiety and learn which techniques work best when they feel scared or frightened. Children are taught to evaluate what makes them anxious and then begin taking steps to face their fears.

"We don't talk about [mental health](#) disorders in children of this age but it is the best time to intervene and prevent future problems," says Miller. "Anxiety has tendency to masquerade as other things - children who are anxious don't have to suffer."

Provided by University of British Columbia

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