

# Anxiety disorders in children are not detected in due time

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Only few children suffering from anxiety disorders undergo treatment. Researchers at the University of Copenhagen have looked into how many children who suffer from the most common yet treatable anxiety disorders that are actually diagnosed in the psychiatric system in Denmark. According to the researchers, the number is surprisingly low compared to other western countries, indicating that anxiety disorders in children and youth are disregarded in Denmark.

Only 5.7 per cent of Danish children suffering from anxiety disorders were diagnosed within the 'Child and Adolescent Psychiatry' in [Denmark](#) from 2004 to 2007, while the corresponding figures from other [western countries](#) reach between 27 and 45 per cent measured in clinical populations. According to the researchers, these results are indicative of a significant lack of reporting of cases of anxiety disorders in Danish children:

"Knowing how easy and quickly children suffering from anxiety disorders may be treated if a disorder is discovered in due time, it is incomprehensible that Denmark does not have available [treatment options](#) for children who suffer from the most common anxiety disorders," says Barbara Hoff Esbjørn, associate professor and PhD at the University's Psychology Clinic, University of Copenhagen.

The researchers will present their findings at the first Nordic conference on anxiety disorders in children. The conference is being held in Copenhagen on 1 June.

## **Danish children resemble other children**

According to the researchers there is no reason to believe that Danish children are significantly different from countries with similarities to Denmark. They believe, that the low number of diagnoses indicate that way too few Danish children in general are treated for their anxiety disorders. A treatment that not necessarily has to be undertaken by the Danish 'Child and Adolescent Psychiatry'.

Based on data from among others the National Council for Children, the researchers estimate that 60-100,000 Danish children between the age of seven and 17 years suffer from anxiety disorders. The researchers have analysed data on diagnoses registered in the national data bank 'Børne- og Ungdomspsykiatri – Danmark' (UK: "Child and Adolescent Psychiatry – Denmark") within the period of 2004 to 2007. They have examined the most frequently occurring anxiety disorders; e.g. separation anxiety, simple phobia, social phobia and generalised anxiety.

## **Risk of mental health disorders as adults**

The researchers have no doubt that untreated anxiety may in time have serious consequences for the children. The majority of them will experience reduced quality of life during their childhood, suffer from learning difficulties in school and, later, while studying. As adults, they risk developing severe mental health disorders, such as depression.

## **Best to treat in immediate environment**

Despite grave consequences, way too few children undergo treatment. According to Associate Professor Ingrid Leth from the Department of Psychology, it is preferable to treat anxiety in children in their immediate environment compared to employing psychiatric treatment.

She points to lack of knowledge and tools to detect anxiety disorders as major factors for the fact that it does not happen to any significant degree:

"It may be difficult to spot children with anxiety disorders, as they do not react outwardly as do children suffering from for example ADHD. The [children](#) are often withdrawn and, essentially, behave as expected. Luckily, we experience a profound will among school teachers, kindergarten teachers, psychologists and medics, who all would like to do more, but who lack the necessary knowledge and tools to 'screen' anxiety disorders," says Ingrid Leth.

The researchers at the Department of Psychology are working on Danish translations and standardisations of a number of questionnaires, which will make it easy to detect if a child suffers from an anxiety disorder that requires treatment. The questionnaires will be available on the researchers' web site in the near future. The hope is that the questionnaire may find wide use within the auspices of education and health in Denmark.

The results of the study have been published in the scientific journals *Journal of [Anxiety Disorders](#)* and *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*.

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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