

The impact of childhood and teenage anxiety disorders on later life, according to new research

April 26 2023, by Mara Violato, Jack Pollard and Tessa Reardon



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Anxiety rates [have been rising](#) in recent years among children and young people, with the situation [partially exacerbated](#) by the pandemic.

Occasional feelings of [anxiety](#) are normal, even in childhood—for

example, a child may feel anxious about an approaching test at school. But if the anxiety is severe, long-lasting and interferes with a child's daily life, it is called an anxiety disorder.

Our [new research](#) has found that the consequences of [anxiety disorders](#) in [young people](#) can include [mental health issues](#) in adulthood, [lower grades](#) at school and lower earnings.

But [parents](#) and [doctors](#) can find it difficult to distinguish everyday, age-appropriate fears and worries from anxiety problems that interfere with daily life.

Where families do seek support, they then struggle to access oversubscribed [mental health services](#). Many children with anxiety disorders do not [receive treatment](#). But our research shows that it is important for children with anxiety problems to receive timely treatment before they develop further.

Assessing research

We carried out a [systematic review](#)—a research project to identify, evaluate and synthesize all published research studies on a specific area of interest.

By examining the findings of this range of research studies, we found that people suffering from anxiety problems in childhood or as teenagers are more likely to have anxiety disorders in later youth and in adulthood. Numerous studies found a link between teenage anxiety disorders and adult depression.

We also found that teenagers who experience anxiety problems often [miss more days of school](#) and [achieve lower grades](#) than those who do not have an anxiety disorder.

One [research study found](#) that people aged 30 who had suffered anxiety disorders as teenagers were more than twice as likely to have been recently unemployed. They may also encounter difficulties in the workplace. This research shows that adults who had [an anxiety disorder](#) in childhood are more likely to struggle at work and to suffer with stress.

Unsurprisingly, all of this results in a considerable economic cost that affects children with anxiety themselves when they are adults, their families, and wider society. One study found that boys who suffered anxiety problems in childhood experienced [3% lower earnings](#) from adult employment.

[Research in the Netherlands](#) published in 2008 found that parents paid an average of €96 out-of-pocket each year for their child's treatment (equating to around £111 in the UK in 2023). Having a child with anxiety may also lead to their [parents missing work](#). A study in the US published in 2020 found that the cost of these missed work days, per child, would cost society US\$856 a year (equating to around £685 in the UK in 2023).

Helping an anxious child

Children typically rely on parents to seek help for them. Their anxiety may simply be part of growing up. However, if you note that the fears and worries of your child persist and start interfering with their daily activities and your family life, then it is wise to seek medical advice.

Our [previous collaborative work](#) showed that one way of helping children with anxiety disorders is to teach their parents how to use principles from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) when supporting their children. Parents worked through a self-help book and had sessions with a therapist.

We have found that this treatment is both [clinically effective and good value for money](#). This treatment has been [widely adopted by the NHS](#). Research on its use has also [taken place](#) in countries such as the US and Australia.

There is not much [research evidence](#) on the long-term effects of treatment of [childhood](#) anxiety, but the existing evidence suggests that [treating childhood anxiety](#) early and effectively could reduce the prevalence of adult mental health disorders. Given the global [mental health crisis](#) currently facing [many countries](#)—and their [health systems](#)—this possibility should not be ignored.

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