Introducing Professor Cathy Creswell

Cathy Creswell is Professor of Psychology. She was based at the University of Reading but has recently moved to the University of Oxford where she works in a joint post across the Department of Experimental Psychology and the Department of Psychiatry. Professor Creswell conducts research into child anxiety disorders and child mental health. Her book, co-authored with Lucy Willets, Overcoming your Child’s Fears and Worries, was first published in 2007 and has recently been updated. In 2018 this second edition was published under the title ‘Helping Your Child With Fears and Worries’.

Top Twelve Take-Aways from Get a Grip Blog with Professor Cathy Creswell

1. A recent study of English children estimates around 7% of English children meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder, this is broadly in line with international estimates. In primary school about equal numbers of boys and girls struggle with anxiety, however, from age 11 it seems more girls experience anxiety problems than boys. The recent study of English children found over 20% of girls in the 17-19 age group met the criteria for an anxiety disorder. It is difficult to say if the rates of anxiety disorder in children are rising as data has only been collected in recent years. While social media is often discussed as having an impact on rising anxiety rates in children there is little data to confirm this and Professor Creswell reminds us that other changes in recent years could also be having an impact on anxiety levels in children such as changes to the education system and demographic changes in terms of levels of income and child poverty.

2. In terms of what causes anxiety, Professor Creswell explains that there is no one single cause and the factors that influence whether someone develops an anxiety disorder appear to interact in a complicated way. We know genetics make a contribution to the development of anxiety and in simple terms around a third of what accounts for making someone anxious comes from genetics and around two thirds comes from environmental influences. Professor Creswell’s own research has shown how critical the interactions are between genetic vulnerabilities and parental responses to those vulnerabilities.

3. Across a number of studies Professor Creswell has found that certain parental responses will make very little difference to whether a child is more or less anxious if you have a laid back child. However, if the child has high trait anxiety (a more nervous child, resistant to new things, cautious and so on), then parental responses do make a difference to whether a child is more or less anxious. Children with high trait anxiety are much more tuned into the environment and much more likely to pick up messages about the world and their capability from their parents’ responses. However, all parents are much more likely to inadvertently give messages of concern (by stepping in early, giving more assistance, expressing concern) to a child with high trait anxiety and this can keep the anxiety going. This complex web of interactions between genetics, the child’s temperament, intuitive parental responses to a child with anxiety and the child’s sensitivity to pick up on their parent’s response make it very tricky as a parent to support a child with anxiety.

4. For many children a bit of reassurance is probably helpful, but for a child having anxiety difficulties it is likely this has already been tried and is not working. For these children reassurance is not enough, they will need to find out for themselves that there is nothing to be scared about or that they can handle it.
5. When helping a child with anxiety, it is important for a parent to think about what they need the child to learn and plan ways to allow their child to learn this through experience. The best way for a child (or adult) to learn they don’t need to be afraid is to actually have a go at undertaking the feared activity and seeing for themselves it was not as bad as predicted. Parents can help children build up to undertaking the feared activity by taking gradual steps with the child doing less fear inducing activities first. Setting small goals and giving small rewards for achieving these goals is really helpful.

6. Alongside encouraging an anxious child to face their fears, parents need to be empathic and show understanding. Be curious and encourage a child to talk about their fears. Talking about fears will not amplify them. Asking a child to rate their different fears on a scale (e.g. 0-100) can be helpful in planning which fears to work on first (the most manageable) and also can help when reflecting back e.g. ’You thought that would be 80/100 terrifying, how was it when you actually did it?’

7. Encountering some anxiety provoking situations in life is likely to be needed to build resilience and for a child to realise that they can cope with feeling nervous. Research indicates that often fathers give challenging play, which is play involving a bit of risk where children learn they can tolerate some anxiety and even feel excitement and fun. Parents have many different roles, one of these is about promoting a reasonable level of risk taking in children.

8. All children encounter anxiety, it is a normal emotion and there are benefits to experiencing anxiety. However, it becomes an anxiety problem when the anxiety is interfering with everyday life. If anxiety is stopping a child fully engaging with school, or impacting on socialising, or causing a lot of distress which disrupts family routines then early intervention is recommended. Initially parents can try the recommendations from Helping Your Child With Fears and Worries (by Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willetts), however, parents should also speak to their GP and seek specialist support if the anxiety problems continue or worsen.

9. Children may not be willing or able to talk about what is making them feel anxious, they may seem to refuse to open up. Parents should ask open questions, show genuine curiosity and empathy, however, despite this some children will still decline to talk. Parents can still help, if you think about ‘what does this child need to learn to reduce their anxiety?’ and then provide experiences which gently enable the child to build their confidence and reduce their fears.

10. Professor Creswell is working on developing a screening tool for identifying Key Stage 2 children with anxiety difficulties for use in schools to help target support to children who need it before they start secondary school. At the moment there are no suitable ways of reliably and efficiently identifying the children who need the help. The screening tools would ask parents, teachers and children a short set of questions. If any primary schools want to take part in the trials to refine the screening tools they should contact Professor Creswell.

11. In response to a question about whether mindfulness based interventions are helpful for anxiety, Professor Creswell explained that a recent large meta-analysis found that while mindfulness based interventions seem to help children develop mindfulness skills and be helpful in reducing depression, they were found to only have a small, yet significant, effect on anxiety outcomes. Other interventions, particularly CBT based ones have been found to be highly effective at reducing anxiety.

12. Anxiety problems are common for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). In a number of studies the general CBT based resources have been found to be effective when used with children with ASD, although they can take a little longer to be effective. At this stage no specific interventions for children with anxiety and ASD have been developed so Professor Creswell advises parents to use the general resources but perhaps think about adapting to suit the particular individual child.
Resources Signposted by Professor Cathy Creswell

Book:  

Websites:  
[www.research.reading.ac.uk/andy](http://www.research.reading.ac.uk/andy) The AnDy research clinic (for children and young people with anxiety and depression) website has resources for young people, parents and schools and professionals.

[www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com) The British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies has a directory of accredited CBT therapists who offer psychological therapy – Professor Creswell suggests looking here if you are looking for a private therapist to help your child with anxiety problems.