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## **What Kids Worry About (It Might Surprise You)**

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka, MSW

Grades, terrorism, war, pimples, divorce, school shootings, bullying, fitting in. What do kids worry about? More than you might think. As hard as we work to shelter our children from the harsher realities of the world, our roles change as our children begin to acquire more information. Every day, children navigate their way through thousands of perplexing messages from the media and from their peers and family members. Television and the Internet are lightning rods, sending waves of anxiety into a young, impressionable community. The schoolyard buzz around current events and what's hot (and not) is enough to knock even the more confident souls off-balance. But perhaps even more powerful is the uncanny radar kids have for parental worries.

### **The Results Are In**

Approximately 1000 kids age 9 to 13 were surveyed recently by KidsHealth® KidsPoll ([www.KidsHealth.org](http://www.KidsHealth.org)) to discover what they worry about most. "School grades" and "Looks or appearance" topped the list, followed by "Problems at home," "Being liked," and "Being out-of-shape or overweight." Aside from current life stressors, nearly one-third of the survey participants fret over their "future" or "being a failure or disappointing loved ones."

### **Elementary School Worries**

Robyn Dubrow, a school psychologist for elementary and middle schools in La Mesa, has a good sense of student concerns. From her experience, anxiety about grades and looks tend to emerge in middle school, but Dubrow sees a preoccupation with weight starting in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

"On picture day, even the elementary school kids are concerned with fashion. And they're sensitive about wearing glasses even in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade," Dubrow says. But according to Dubrow, parents' arguing and yelling adds stress for kids of all ages. They will sometimes say, "I'm scared when my parents are mad."

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Sue, a second grade teacher at a San Carlos elementary school, also has a 13-year-old son. She explains that her second graders, age 7, “worry about things they can’t control; war, school shootings, terrorism, things related to September 11<sup>th</sup>, divorce, parental troubles, and gangs if they live in the inner city (some students are bused in). They worry about what their parents worry about.”

Sue’s son, on the other hand, is more worried about his appearance and fitting in with friends. “Age 9 to 13 is the beginning of the social years and worries tend to change,” Sue says.

### **Kids Get Insomnia, Too**

*KidStress: Effective Strategies Parents Can Teach Their Kids for School, Family, Peers, the World- and Everything*, by Georgia Witkin, Ph.D. (Viking Penguin, 1999), details a study of over 700 children under 12. Witkin found that insomnia, nightmares, and stomachaches were the top physical manifestations of worry and stress for youngsters.

### **High School Worries**

Teens value the opinions of their peers immensely and are also rapidly approaching a thrilling, but frightening milestone: independence from their parents. Thus, real-life troubles take on new, distressing proportions.

### **Parents are Expert Worriers and Children Know It**

Our children’s style of worrying is based on the behavioral templates we provide for them. How can we show our kids effective skills for coping with worry if we’re just doing what our parents did, and we know it’s not working for us?

According to Alice Fleming, author of *What, Me Worry?* (MacMillan Publishing Company, 1992), there are four basic steps we can all use to “put worry to work”:

1. Find out if the problem is solvable.
2. Figure out what’s causing it.
3. Decide how to solve it.
4. Do it.

Fleming addresses worries that can’t be solved by advising us to “take steps to ease the strain.” By taking care of ourselves and staying involved with various activities and friends we “will feel less at the mercy of (our) worries,” even if we can’t change the problem, Fleming asserts.

If our kids see a healthy response to difficult situations, maybe they won’t feel as overwhelmed with life’s twists, turns and question marks.

Virginia Lopez, a licensed clinical social worker and therapist at a City Heights High School, works with 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders. “They worry most about family problems, parents arguing. They’re very aware of the finances and worry about the rent money and that there might not be enough to buy the clothes they want. Many of these kids are caring for younger siblings after school, which is an added burden,” Lopez says. The anxiety the students experience sometimes evolves into depression, the biggest problem Lopez treats.

### **Talk About It**

Compounding the stress children experience, Witkin found that fewer than one in ten kids feel there is open communication with their folks, and fewer than one in ten parents feel the need for more communication with their children. However, in the KidsHealth study, when asked what they usually do when they are stressed or worried, 25% of the kids surveyed said “talk to my parent(s)” or “talk to my friends” and 24% said they “keep my worries to myself.” Only 9% of kids answered, “do something about what’s causing my worries.”

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Teaching children the difference between things they can and can't control is a cornerstone in guiding them in the path of a less worried life. If grades worry your child, help her with her time management skills so she can carve out the time she needs to study and do homework. Make arrangements for extra tutoring if it would help your child feel more competent in a particularly stressful subject.

But be sure to look at your own expectations as a parent as well. Remind yourself that there is more to childhood than getting good grades or making the team. Unscheduled time for simple relaxation, creativity, and hanging out with friends is vital to your child's growing sense of personal identity. Learning to be comfortable with downtime is a gift that will help your child feel less stress throughout her life.

### **Yelling Is Scary**

A common source of anxiety for children is tension between their parents. Differences of opinion between parents are normal and the resulting arguments should not necessarily be hidden from children. The key is whether the arguments remain in the realm of two rational people aiming to communicate their points of view, or whether the "discussion" frequently escalates into hurtful yelling matches.

One type of "argument" models to children that people who love each other can disagree and still be kind and respectful. They will learn that it is safe to have their own opinions at home and that they don't have to pretend to agree. While kids will not always receive the same respect for their opinions outside the family culture, it's a good bet that they will feel a basic confidence that there's nothing wrong with them if their ideas don't mesh with those of a particular peer group.

But children who are put on edge by their parents' harsh style of arguing will often be plagued by an uneasy feeling that their opinions are best kept to themselves, worrying that they may receive the wrath of "disagreement." The fundamental ability to disagree and not "just go with the flow" when it doesn't feel comfortable is key in diminishing kids' worries about "fitting in."

Of course, attempting to fit in is also part of the budding sense of wanting to belong to a community, which is a positive step in becoming a responsible young adult. It's when a child begins to ignore his own sense of values and self-respect for the sake of belonging to a peer group that parents need to address how their child is being driven by worry over peer pressures.

### **The Information Age**

In her book *Stress and your Child; Helping Kids Cope with the Strains and Pressures of Life* (Ballantine Books, 1995), Bettie B. Youngs, Ph.D., Ed.D., asks us to ponder how the Information Age has changed childhood.

"By high school graduation the average American kid will have spent more time in front of the television than in the classroom," says Youngs. They know that things they see on TV could happen to their own family. Emphasize that the child is safe at home but don't discount their fears or tell them to just stop worrying about it. Depending on the age of the child, parents can acknowledge that bad things can happen but that the chances are very slim.

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For instance, San Diego children may worry about another firestorm or earthquakes. Parents can help by discussing a family safety plan. That way, the kids feel their concern has been heard and addressed.

**Worried? Help Someone Else!**

If your kids are worried about a particular issue they can't control, Witkin suggests finding some way for them to help people dealing with that specific circumstance. If news coverage of a fire or war is haunting your child, do a search online to see if there is a way to help an affected family, even in a small way. If possible, donate an item your child can relate to, such as a new teddy bear or blanket. This gives your child a chance to feel like they have done something concrete to help, and also helps them move outside of themselves, gaining perspective and gratitude for the many good things in their lives.

For more information on KidsHealth KidsPoll visit [www.KidsHealth.org](http://www.KidsHealth.org). Complete survey findings and methodology can be found at [nahec.org/KidsPoll](http://nahec.org/KidsPoll).

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