

Hidden Signs of Anxiety & Overwhelm in Youth

What parents, educators & caregivers often miss



Anxious kids rarely say "I feel anxious." Research demonstrates it more often shows up as a stomachache, a meltdown, or straight-up perfectionism. **Here are 3 evidence-based signs that get overlooked**, and how they can look different in younger children versus teens.

1 Physical Complaints

96% of anxious youth report a physical symptom¹

Kids don't always have the words for anxiety, so **it shows up in the body first**, especially on school days and when a doctor can't find a medical cause.

YOUNGER CHILDREN

- **Frequent stomachaches or headaches**, often worse on school mornings
- **Trouble falling/staying asleep**, nightmares, wanting to sleep with a parent
- **Frequent trips to the school nurse**

TEENS

- **Racing heart, chest tightness, dizziness**, shortness of breath (panic-like)
- **Restlessness (74%) and muscle tension (45%)** are most common²
- **Fatigue and appetite changes** with no clear medical cause

2 Irritability & Emotional Outbursts

Linked to anxiety independent of ODD/depression³

An anxious mind stays on alert, and **that tension often spills out as anger rather than obvious worry**. Research links youth irritability directly to anxiety severity, as well as to later anxiety diagnoses in adulthood.

YOUNGER CHILDREN

- **Frequent, lengthy tantrums or meltdowns** that seem outsized for the trigger
- **Clinginess mixed with sudden tearfulness**
- Can be **mistaken for a "behavior problem"** at school

TEENS

- **Short temper, snapping**, or frequent arguments framed as "moodiness"
- May say they're **"tired," "stressed," or "annoyed"** rather than anxious
- **Sleep problems** often intensify the link between irritability and anxiety⁴

3 Perfectionism Driven by Fear of Mistakes

Fear of failure ~5x more predictive than high standards⁵

High achievement alone isn't the red flag. The concerning pattern is **a child driven by fear of getting it wrong or letting others down**: this type of perfectionism is moderately linked to anxiety, while simply having high personal standards is not.

YOUNGER CHILDREN

- **Meltdowns over small mistakes**; redoing work repeatedly
- **Reluctance to try new things** for fear of not being "good at it"
- **Excessive reassurance-seeking** ("Is this right?")

TEENS

- **Intense pressure** around grades, college, or performance
- Looks fine at school, then **"falls apart" or shuts down** at home
- **Harsh self-criticism**; fear of disappointing others serves as their underlying motivator



If you notice these signs, trust your instincts and reach out. **MindPeace** connects students and families to school-based and community mental health support. Learn more at mindpeacecincinnati.com

Every student connected
Every partner engaged
Every community stronger

Developed with AI-assisted synthesis support from the following sources:

1. 2. Ginsburg et al., J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry (2006), PMID 17003663 | 3. Cornacchio et al., PMID 26703910 | 4. Sleep-mediation study, PMID 29222620 | 5. Fernandes et al., meta-analysis of 121 studies, PMID 37194469 | 6. Stringaris et al., 20-yr longitudinal study, PMID 19570932 | 7. Smith et al., meta-analysis of 11 longitudinal studies, PMID 28980487 | 8. Irritability in Youths: A Critical Integrative Review, Am J Psychiatry, PMC12010774 | 9. Egger et al., PMID 10405503 | 10. Beidel, PMID 1791272 | 11. NIMH, Anxiety Disorders, nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders