

We live in stressful times. With the advent of social media and increased expectations, kids have to deal with more than ever before. The unfortunate truth is that children do not always possess the coping skills necessary to deal effectively with stress. As a result, you will find a lot of anxious students in the classroom. The Centers For Disease Control and Prevention reports that over seven percent of children in the United States have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Of course, there are many more anxious kids out there that have never been diagnosed. Additionally, this number does not account for those children who may not be clinically anxious but still feel stressed out by issues at school or home. The bottom line is that a significant amount of children face anxiety on a daily basis. Teachers need to be equipped to help them cope during their time in school.

## **What Does Anxiety Look Like?**

The first thing to consider is that there are many types of anxiety. Most people think of anxiety as extreme levels of worry. Although worry is a primary component of anxiety, phobias, panic attacks, and obsessive-compulsive behavior (OCD) are also indicative of anxiety disorders. Furthermore, anxiety in a child does not always look the same as for an adult. Here are some telltale signs:

### **Physical Symptoms**

A headache, nausea, or a stomach ache may be signs of anxiety. Although these are real somatic symptoms, they may have a psychological source. At times, children will use physical symptoms as an excuse to fuel school avoidance.

### **Avoidance**

Avoidance is a symptom of anxiety for children and adults. In children, it may take the form of avoiding tests, certain classes, or school altogether. Refusing to go to school is not uncommon for children who possess significant school-related anxiety. Socially anxious kids may avoid group work, participating in class, or socializing in general.

### **Changes In Behavior**

As is true with most problems, any significant change in behavior may be a clue that a child is experiencing stress. For example, a drop in grades or sudden aggressive outbursts may be a sign of anxious feelings.

### **Thoughts Of Fear And Danger**

Some worry is normal but a child with significant anxiety will consistently voice their fears. For instance, are they repeatedly worried about test performance or what the other kids think of them? Additionally, anxious students may look to teachers and peers for constant reassurance.

### **Sleep Issues**

Sleep is often disrupted due to anxious thoughts getting in the way. Anxiety causes agitation and restlessness rather than relaxation. A lack of sleep negatively affects school performance, behavior, and mood. Sleep issues often start a vicious cycle where anxiety causes a lack of sleep and, in turn, the lack of sleep leads to more anxiety. Teachers are often the first to tell when a student is consistently tired and can make an initial intervention.

## **Problems With Attention**

Difficulty focusing is a hallmark of anxiety. It is hard to pay attention when you have so much on your mind. The student that daydreams and has difficulty staying on task may be suffering from anxiety. Since inattention is also one of the main components of ADHD, a teacher must look for other anxiety symptoms to support a differential diagnosis.

## **Not Completing Work Or Handing It In**

Anxious students are often perfectionistic and highly self-critical. They cannot bear it if they do not get an excellent grade. Therefore, they may not complete their work because they are afraid of being judged. The rationale is that if they don't make an attempt they don't have to face the fear of failure. Unfortunately, this probably bleeds into other areas of their life; they avoid new experiences and won't take any risks.

## **How Can Teachers Mitigate Anxiety In The Classroom?**

Luckily, there are steps teachers can take to help anxious students:

### **Use Personal Experience To Normalize Anxiety**

Teachers can assist their students with normalizing anxiety. Telling children that everyone, including themselves, gets anxious at times is helpful. Sharing your own anxiety—and what coping skills you use—makes much more of an impact than giving students hypothetical situations.

### **Help Students Confront Anxiety Through Gradual Exposure**

Every anxious person has a tendency to want to avoid fear-provoking situations. In order to decrease anxiety, however, it needs to be confronted. School personnel can put students in situations where they are gradually exposed to stimuli to which they are afraid. Gradual is a key word here. You don't want to throw someone who can't swim into the deep end. It is likely not to end well. For example, you could put someone who is afraid about group work into a very small group with only a couple of other people. After they are used to the small group, they can move up to a larger group.

### **Be Empathic But Don't Overdo It**

It is a natural instinct to protect children from worrying. Rescuing students from their anxiety, however, is one of the worst things you can do to alleviate it. It is important that kids learn to confront anxiety in order to develop effective coping skills. Students will often look to teachers for reassurance and teachers need to fight their inclination to provide it. Ideally, a person learns to think through a situation and provide their own reassurance. This is especially important for children who might be developing OCD tendencies, as the reassurance seeking behavior may become their compulsion.

### **Emphasize Effort Over Achievement**

Perfectionistic students often have a lot of anxiety over the quality of their schoolwork. At the extreme end, these students may develop OCD. Teachers who emphasize the final result, rather than the effort, feed into those perfectionistic tendencies. In addition, prioritizing grades can lead to poor self-image and increased stress levels, especially for students with lesser intellectual abilities.

## **Promote Relaxation/Mindfulness**

Providing some relaxation and mindfulness education is becoming increasingly popular in schools. In some schools, they offer structured programs that teach simple meditation practices. In other cases, the school counselor or teacher may provide relaxation and mindfulness exercises. Research shows that mindfulness meditation decreases stress and anxiety. The need for mindfulness education has expanded as people acknowledge the increasing amounts of anxiety in children. If you need an introduction to mindfulness, apps like Calm and Headspace are a good start.

## **Teach Problem-Solving Skills**

Anxiety is fueled by irrational thought. Anxious people tend to catastrophize and make problems into something larger than they need to be. Problem-solving uses realistic thought processes to formulate answers to problems. By teaching students to rationally assess their issues, it helps them alleviate anxious feelings.

## **Encourage Independence**

Anxious children often don't have a whole lot of conviction in their ability to handle situations on their own. Giving them opportunities to accomplish tasks independently helps them foster a positive self-image. For example, giving a student a simple task—like collecting materials at the end of class—can go a long way in building confidence.

## **Reinforce Students Who Go Outside Their "Comfort Zone"**

Performing activities that are anxiety-provoking takes courage. It is much easier to avoid taking risks. Therefore, it is important to reward children who are willing to confront anxiety and be uncomfortable. Rewards can be as simple as some verbal acknowledgment of their specific behavior.

## **Set Clear Expectations**

Anxious children like to know what to expect. Teachers can help reduce anxiety by giving students clear directions as to the tasks they must perform. In addition, having a consistent classroom routine will help take away uncertainty. Making small efforts can go a long way. For example, teachers can post the daily schedule and give students adequate lead time on future assignments.

## **Practice Empathy and Patience**

Dealing with an anxious student can be frustrating, especially if you do not have much anxiety yourself. You may find yourself wondering "what is the big deal?" It is vital to understand that anxious people make mountains out of molehills. If you react with anger or frustration your relationship with that child is going to suffer. You are much more likely to make a positive impact if the student trusts you and does not feel judged.

## **Never Single Them Out**

Along those same lines, it is important to address a student's issues in private. The worst thing you can do is expose a child's anxiety in front of the class. They will be mortified and never fully trust you again. It could set them back for weeks.

## **Practice Realistic Self-Talk**

Kids may not realize they talk to themselves but a teacher or counselor can provide a quick lesson. Anxious children give themselves negative messages full of doubt and fear. Students need to learn to replace that negativity with more encouraging self-talk. The more you practice realistic self-talk, the more you realize that what you had been saying to yourself was overly negative and unrealistic. Thinking realistically is half the battle to reduce anxiety.

## **Encourage Sleep and Healthy Diet**

Teaching students about the importance of sleep and diet are essential for anxiety and all mental health. A lack of sleep and a poor diet contributes to increased anxiety, depression, and a host of other problems. Kids may get some of this information in health class, but it never hurts for teachers and counselors to give a consistent reminder. Parents may need some education in this area as well. Teachers will want to talk to parents about a child's sleep habits if they notice signs of sleep deprivation in class.

## **Work With Parents**

It is essential that teachers and parents work together to help children. A successful intervention usually requires an overlap between home and school. Regular communication between teacher and parent is essential to ensure that each party is working with accurate information. The more consistency between home and school the better.

## **Involve The School Counselor**

School counselors are a great resource and they can play multiple roles in helping a student with their anxiety. They can counsel students individually and may be able to offer a safe place for a student to go if they need a break from class. Additionally, counselors often provide some sort of group treatment that could address anxiety. They work with parents regarding recommendations and interventions. Furthermore, a counselor can refer parents to a therapist or someone who can prescribe medication, if needed.

## **School Personnel Can Help Manage Student's Anxiety**

Some may feel that school staff should stick to focusing on academics, but part of education is developing social and emotional skills. As a teacher, you are undoubtedly going to be faced with anxious students. Because children spend so much time in school, staff have a unique opportunity to recognize and assess anxiety. By using some simple interventions, teachers can help educate children on how to cope with stress—and improve their academics as well.

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