

Anxiety at School

Anxiety is a common experience - everyone feels anxious from time to time. Usually, these feelings are quite adaptive and keep us safe and performing well. However, when feelings of fear and worry persist over long periods, are exaggerated, or occur in the absence of actual threat, anxiety can be considered problematic. Educators have an important role in helping students to maintain a healthy level of anxiety.

Creating Supportive Classroom Environments

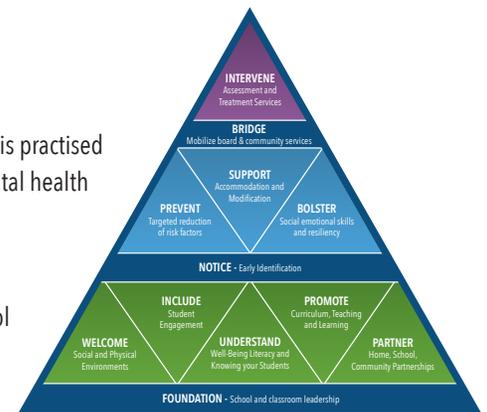
Inclusive and calm classroom environments facilitate academic learning and social-emotional well-being, and help students to regulate feelings of anxiety.

WELCOME, INCLUDE AND PARTNER

- Review general classroom-level strategies for creating welcoming and inclusive environments
- Greet each student individually by name daily
- Build relationships and develop rapport and trust with students
- Practice inclusion in your words, examples, actions, and visual displays in the classroom
- Create a learning environment that facilitates risk-taking and participation, where a growth mindset is practised
- Set a positive tone in interactions with parents and families, being open to conversations about mental health

UNDERSTAND

- Know your students; take time to get to know their unique stories and strengths
- Participate in professional learning opportunities to enhance your knowledge about anxiety at school
- Learn more about anxiety in [Supporting Minds](#), [ABCs of Mental Health](#), [aboutkidshealth](#), and other high-quality sources
- Know your school's referral process and pathways to service within the school and board.



PROMOTE

- Maintain a calm patient tone when speaking with students, especially with those who become anxious easily
- Normalize the experience of anxiety, and work to reduce potential sources of stress at school
- Have predictable routines in the classroom and announce changes in advance
- Reinforce social-emotional well-being skills, like problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution
- Reinforce cognitive well-being skills, such as time management, study skills, and stress reduction techniques
- Build in time for mindfulness/contemplation, self-regulation, and/or stress reduction techniques

Noticing Signs of Anxiety Problems

Although most students are resilient and their anxiety is short-lived, if feelings of stress or worry become intense, out of proportion, and/or persistent over long periods of time this may interfere with a student's well-being and ability to learn. Educators are well-positioned to notice when a student is struggling with anxiety at school.

Although different signs occur at different ages, in general, the most prominent signs include:

Elementary Age Students	Secondary Age Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Attendance concerns ✓ Separation issues ✓ Social issues – extreme shyness around peers ✓ Difficulty speaking in groups or in class ✓ Refusal and avoidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Performance on tests not matching ability ✓ Social and relational concerns ✓ Recurring physical symptoms without medical explanation ✓ Difficulty speaking in groups or in class ✓ Withdrawal and avoidance

If these signs of difficulty appear to be severe, prolonged, significantly interfere with day-to-day functioning, or if the child's family is expressing concerns, a discussion with your school administrator is important. In some situations, a referral to professional mental health support within the school board and/or community may be needed, and the school can offer support to the students and his/her family through the process.

Supporting Students with Signs of Anxiety Problems

Educators are not mental health professionals and are not expected to provide assessment or counseling support to students who are exhibiting signs of anxiety problems. Educators are, however, able to observe, document and work collaboratively as part of a team to provide caring support at school.

Some Helpful Classroom Strategies for Students who Need Extra Support to Manage Anxiety Include:

When you observe...	Some strategies include...
Difficulty separating from caregivers	<p>GOOD FOR ALL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Provide consistent and predictable arrival routines ✓ Provide positive reinforcement for brave behaviour and refrain from commenting on fears <p>NECESSARY FOR SOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Develop a plan for the student's arrival at school ✓ Arrange for a buddy to greet the child and help with the transition into the classroom ✓ Maintain regular communication with the parent/guardian and encourage their participation in classroom activities, as appropriate ✓ Work with the parent/guardian to identify positive ways to reward non-anxious behaviour (e.g., allow the student to take home a special book or toy when they are brave at school)
An exaggerated need to be perfect	<p>GOOD FOR ALL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Model a growth mindset-mistakes are a part of learning and can be seen as opportunities! ✓ Encourage the use of brainstorming and rough drafts ✓ Use rubrics to outline realistic performance expectations <p>NECESSARY FOR SOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Acknowledge the student for finishing tasks on time without continual revising ✓ Work with families and the support team to find strategies that help the student to understand expectations and to complete assigned work within the required time frame
Worries about tests and exams	<p>GOOD FOR ALL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Provide instruction about effective test-taking strategies (e.g., doing easy questions first) ✓ Encourage the use of breathing exercises to keep calm <p>NECESSARY FOR SOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Avoid 'pop' quizzes; some students need advance notice ✓ Provide a separate environment for test-taking ✓ Allow additional time, if needed
Anxiety about completing tasks in time	<p>GOOD FOR ALL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Provide advance notice of tests, assignments and time-limited tasks ✓ Use checklists and visual reminders of tasks and upcoming events ✓ Help students to chunk tasks into manageable units, using a calendar or schedule <p>NECESSARY FOR SOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Provide feedback and encouragement for each section of the task completed ✓ Allow additional time, if needed
Fear of social situations at school, including public speaking	<p>GOOD FOR ALL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Work to develop an atmosphere of acceptance and kindness throughout the classroom ✓ Reassure students that everyone feels nervous about speaking in front of a class ✓ Gradually work up to class presentations by having students practice in pairs/small groups <p>NECESSARY FOR SOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Resist the tendency to allow the student to avoid social interactions – it is important that they are exposed to these situations and experience overcoming the fear ✓ If a student is worried about responding to questions in class, consider having the student answer yes/no questions first (instead of open-ended), rehearsing questions and answers before class, and/or developing a cue that tells you that the student is ready to respond

Adapted from Manassis, K (2012). Generalized Anxiety Disorder in the classroom. In J.Q. Bostic & A.L. Bagnell (Eds), Evidence-based School Psychiatry, Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 21 (1).

Questions? Contact us at kshort@smh-assist.ca.

