



ACADEMIC ANXIETY

What is Academic Anxiety?

Anxiety over tests, performance ability, time pressures and competition with their peers as well as fear of teacher and parent expectations. Some examples of academic anxiety include math anxiety, test anxiety and reading anxiety.

How can teachers, with the support of parents, help to alleviate academic anxiety amongst elementary school students?

Anxiety is one of the most predominant mental health disorders affecting 10-21% of children. This issue should not go ignored, as research has linked anxiety to other problems including depression, poor self-esteem and attention difficulties. In general, resources emphasize the importance of having open dialogue with children, incorporating relaxation exercises and teaching children a variety of anxiety coping strategies. Anxiety disorders have the potential to create chronic problems. Therefore it is imperative that we address this issue at a young age and introduce anxiety-reducing strategies at school and home to help prevent future problems.

Anxiety is “ a psychological state in which the person’s sense of uneasy suspense and worry is triggered by ambiguous circumstances” (Zeidner & Matthews, 2011). It is made up of physiological, behavioural and cognitive components. The term *trait anxiety* refers to long-term anxiety and remains with the individual where in comparison *state anxiety* is triggered by a specific event. There are many anxiety disorders including: social phobia, separation-anxiety, specific phobia, school phobia and generalized anxiety disorder. Generalized anxiety disorder is when children have difficulty controlling excessive worrying and suffer from at least one somatic symptom over the span of at least six months. Possible symptoms: restlessness, difficulty sleeping, tiredness, irritability, concentration problems and difficulty relaxing. Perfectionists suffer from generalized anxiety disorder. In the context of school, students who suffer from generalized anxiety disorder worry about their school performance including their quality of work, test results and ability to perform in sports and music. Children with this disorder look for constant reassurance from teachers.

Key Resources:

Websites:

<http://www.anxietybc.com>

<http://www.shared-care.ca/toolkits>

Books:

Taming Worry Dragons: A Manual for Children, Parents, and other Coaches Fourth Edition by Jane Garland and Sandra Clark

What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid’s Guide to Overcoming Anxiety by Dawn Huebner

TEACHERS



Mistakes:

Change the mindset from one of shame where students are not willing to take chances to one that uses mistakes to promote deeper learning.

Self Talk:

Help students to transform negative self-talk into positive self-talk. Have students create a script that they can refer to when they feel a negative self-talk.

Study Skills:

-Introduce students to the importance of creating a study schedule well in advance of the test so that they can seek help on difficult content.

-Teach students that for each study session they should have a goal and the required materials needed for effective studying.

- Encourage students to create summaries of the main points and use flash cards and mnemonics to help learn key terms.

Test-Taking Skills:

-Explain to students the importance of reviewing the entire test identifying the easier questions that they could answer first to gain confidence.

-Teach students the importance of budgeting their time and spending more time on questions of higher value.

-Encourage students at the beginning of the test to write down any mnemonics that they had created and participate in a memory dump, writing down key terms or vocabulary that they can refer back to throughout the test.

Relaxation Techniques:

Incorporate 10-15minutes of mindfulness exercises daily or at least a few times per week.

Listening Device: Have a bell and/or chime and hit it, have students listen until the sound fades away.

Practice Breathing: Have students focus on breathing such as through the box breathing method. Draw a box with your finger: inhale for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, inhale for 4 counts and exhale for 4 counts.

Muscular Relaxation: Tense muscles and then relax (e.g. squeeze fists for 5 seconds then let them relax)

Calm down Corners: Create a space in the classroom where students can go to calm themselves down. Corners could have calming materials such as bubbles, calming bottles, books, fidget toys and sensory objects etc.

PARENTS



Parental Anxiety:

Research has found that it is highly probable that anxious children have parents who also suffer from anxiety.

Children with anxious parents are more likely to follow their parents' anxious behaviour if they see this behaviour being modeled. Therefore, help to model calmness and anxiety coping strategies for your child.

Avoid overscheduling:

Overscheduling your child in sports, music, academics and other extra-curricular activities can be overwhelming and cause sleep deprivation as well as exhaustion. Give your child free time even if this means cancelling an activity. Also let your child "play" to allow them the opportunity to explore, experiment, and release stress.

Open Dialogue:

Step 1: Open Discussion- State and Define the Problem

Discuss with your child their worries/anxious thoughts. Make a list of their academic worries or have them draw out their worry bully if they are younger.

Step 2: Make a Plan-Identify Skills and Solutions

Create a list with your child that identifies their positive skills, talents and abilities. Together develop a plan with your child to think how they can use their skills to battle worries. Also, have them create some goals.

Step 3: Practice and Play

With younger children transform them into a Worry Warrior (create a costume). Their "tools" are the skills that they had developed in step 2 written in words or pictures on index cards. Next role-play the situations involving academic anxiety. For older children, create a Worry Warrior cartoon strip with annotations or discuss their anxious situations and the skills they would use.

Worry Time:

Schedule a 15-minute daily "Worry Time" for your child. This period must be free of interruptions. Throughout the day, if your child comes to you with a worry, ask them to lock it away and save it for their worry time (have them visualize locking away their worries in a box that has a strong lock). With practice and over time, the goal is for the worry time to turn into talk time with you.

Establish Routines:

Routines and schedules help alleviate academic anxiety.

Ensure the Essentials:

Ensure that your child eats and sleeps regularly as children who suffer from academic anxiety will often neglect these basic essential needs.