Supporting Anxious Children in the Classroom

Acknowledging anxiety and supporting kids to find healthy ways to cope helps build resilience

Anxiety disorders develop as our cognitive ability develops. Teachers play an important role in the lives of children at this stage of development and can support kids to find healthy ways of coping with anxiety in their lives.

Childhood anxiety often goes undetected

- Anxiety is normal, and all children will experience it.

But sometimes it becomes something more serious

- If a child feels overwhelmed by intense fear or worry that are out of proportion to the situation, they are at risk for developing an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorder

- Fear, and the avoidance fear inspires, can be seriously impairing for a child.

A lot of kids are basically happy and enjoying life but may be struggling with certain situations. This makes their anxiety easy to overlook.

Common triggers

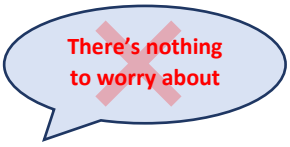
- Separation
- Physical illness
- Poor performance
- Embarrassment
- Specific things e.g. dogs

Signs and Symptoms (often non-specific or indirect)

- Trouble sleeping
- Stomach aches/other physical problems
- Avoidant and clingy
- Trouble focusing or fidgety
- Explosive outbursts

What Kind of Support Can Teachers Offer?





DON'T talk them out of it.
We automatically want to give reassurance by saying that everything will be OK.

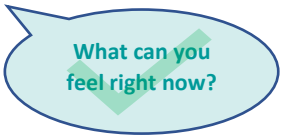
We also often end up allowing them to avoid the fearful situation. Unfortunately, this response will keep the anxiety going.

As much as the child wants to believe you, their brains won't let them.

Avoidance reinforces anxiety.
It is a coping strategy for dealing with anxiety, but it is short term and reinforces triggers instead of allowing resilience to develop.

- **DO** ask what it feels like for them.
  Give them time and space to answer in their own way.
  An anxious child needs to hear that you get it.





- **NAME** the anxious behaviour for them.
  For example "talking in front of everyone is scary."
  Or "you don't want to come to school because it's making you feel bad." (avoidance)

- **NORMALISE** **Everyone experiences anxiety at some point in their life.**
  Scary things happen and it can be really hard to cope. Anxiety can also seem to happen for no reason at all, this might mean something else in the child's life is impacting them at school.



- **EXPLAIN**
  "Anxiety feels different for everyone. The feelings you get when you're anxious about something are your body's way of protecting you from danger. When something scary is happening, a little part of your brain switches on and gets your body ready for action, like having your own little superhero in your brain ready to protect you. It gets you ready to run away from danger, or to fight against it: fight or flight."

  "The superhero in your brain can get really active, especially if there are lots of changes happening in your life, or you're stuck in situations you don't like that are out of your control. If your superhero is getting super-active and making you do stuff that isn't helpful, like staying away from school, or yelling at people, you can step in and take charge."

Get the child to give the superhero in their brain a name [e.g. Maui, Batman, Captain Underpants, Dave]. This externalising process can make it easier for the child to think about cause and effect, also what to do about the situation.

- **BREATHE**
  "Your superhero tells your body to get lots of oxygen to the muscles in your arms and legs so you can fight or run away. It gets your body to do this by going from breathing normally with slow deep breaths, to breathing fast and shallow. You can tell your superhero when it's time to slow down by taking charge of your breathing."

Some examples of how to help a child slow their breathing:

Belly Breathing

Place one of the child's hands on their chest and one on their belly. Get them to breathe ***in through their nose*** for half their age in seconds, hold for half their age in seconds and breathe ***out through their mouth*** for their full age in seconds. This method works well up to age 8. The structure would be: – 4 seconds breathing in, hold for 4s and out for 8. If your child or young person is over 8, use the following: – 4 seconds breath in, hold for 5 and breathe out for 8. (Adjust this as per the needs of the child or young person). Get the child to focus on the way their hands move as the air goes in and out of their body.

Hot Chocolate Breathing

Get the child to imagine they're holding a cup of hot chocolate:
"Breathe in, smell the hot chocolate. Breathe out, blow the steam and cool it down."

Bubble-Breathing

Fill a glass to halfway with water. Place a straw in the glass and ask the child to take a deep belly breath and hold for 3 seconds (see Belly Breathing exercise for how to do this), then blow into the straw slowly through their mouth. Repeat this 5 – 10 times (or as many as the child needs to feel less anxious).

If you can get a child to calm down by breathing slowly and deeply, they will be in a better position to think about how brave they are, and perhaps take steps toward adapting to their situation in positive ways.

- **PLAY A FOCUSING GAME**

If a child is in a state of panic, bring their awareness to what they can sense in the environment.

5 Senses

- ✓ Name a colour you can see and focus on that for 10 seconds.
- ✓ Name a sound you can hear and focus on listening to that for 10 seconds.
- ✓ Hold something in your hand and name what it feels like, focus on that feeling for 10 seconds.
- ✓ Think of the last thing you ate/drank and name the taste, spend 10 seconds thinking about that taste.
- ✓ Breathe in slowly through your nose and name what you can smell. Keep breathing in deeply through your nose for 10 seconds focusing on that smell.

- **PLAY A GAME TO RELAX TENSION IN THE BODY**

Robots, Jellyfish and Towers

The aim of this game is to practice progressive muscle relaxation. You call out each of these names and the child mimics the behaviour of each one:
– ***Robots***, who are stiff and robotic in their movements.
– ***Jellyfish***, who are floppy and relaxed.
– ***Towers***, which are strong and stretch up high into the sky.
The game begins with each person cycling through the actions a couple times. Try to keep mixing the order of the names up and ensuring there's a jellyfish movement after the tense movements.

- **PRAISE THE EFFORTS OF THE CHILD**

As the child works on addressing their anxiety, point out how hard they're working and congratulate them on how strong and brave they are.

If you notice that a child is overwhelmed by feelings of intense fear or worry on a regular basis, you can help by talking with their caregiver, school counsellor, or principal about getting support:

Encourage caregiver and child to visit their GP to talk over what's happening.

The Anxiety NZ Trust clinic is in St. Lukes, Auckland, and provides the community with several support options:

- ✓ Children, adults and families can access help from specialist psychologists – funding may apply for children (not income tested) or adults.
- ✓ Referrals accepted from GPs, counsellors and other health professionals and in some cases direct from families – visit www.anxiety.org.nz
- ✓ Adults/families and young people can use the 24/7 national helpline for immediate support (0800 ANXIETY / 0800 269 4389).
- ✓ Evidence shows that children benefit from the FRIENDS resilience program run by Anxiety NZ, see www.anxiety.org.nz for details of workshops.

Check out these excellent online resources:

http://www.commonground.org.nz/
http://www.parenthelp.org.nz/
https://www.skylight.org.nz/topics/15
https://www.whatsup.co.nz/kids/ - 0800 WHATSUP

Some useful definitions:

Anxiety: Moderate to severe anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric illnesses affecting children and adults. Feeling anxious to some degree is normal for everyone. Anxiety and fear are adaptive and helpful emotions which allows us to notice danger, keeps us safe and helps us adapt to our environment. However sometimes anxiety levels can become severe or longstanding and beyond our abilities to cope, which can pose a risk to our mental and physical health. It can also cause significant distress or impair your ability to function in important areas of life such as work, school, or relationships.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder: An anxiety disorder characterised by chronic anxiety, exaggerated worry and tension, even when there is little or nothing to provoke it.

Trauma & Stressor Related Disorders: Disorders related to the experience of a trauma (e.g., unexpected death of a loved one, a car accident, combat, or a violent incident) or stressor (e.g. divorce, starting or changing school, moving). See Dr Burke's Ted Talk, *How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime*.

Separation Anxiety Disorder: Excessive anxiety concerning separation from home or major attachment figures that is beyond what would be expected for one's developmental level. This can occur in children, adolescents, or adults, but is more commonly found in children.

Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia): Excessive fear of becoming embarrassed or humiliated in social situations, which often leads to significant avoidance behaviours. Includes school phobia, which is the sudden aversion to or fear of attending school.

This resource was created by Ruth Knopp and the Anxiety NZ Trust Team
using information from anxiety.org.nz ; childmind.org ; kidshealth.org.nz