

Supporting Anxious Youth: Strategies for Schools

Sophie Palitz, M.A. & Jordan Davis, M.A.

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT ANXIETY DISORDERS CLINIC

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

WWW.CHILDANXIETY.ORG

Overview

- ▶ What is anxiety?
- ▶ Recognizing anxiety disorders at school
- ▶ Strategies for schools
- ▶ Treatment of anxiety
- ▶ The CAADC

What is anxiety?

- ▶ Everyone has anxiety!
- ▶ How do we know it's a problem?
 - ▶ Does it cause significant distress?
 - ▶ Does it cause interference in daily life, family or social relationships?
 - ▶ Is it developmentally appropriate?

In general...

- ▶ 8-12% of children and adolescents ages 4-20 suffer from one or more anxiety disorders
- ▶ Children with anxiety disorders are much less frequently referred for help than those with externalizing problems
- ▶ Anxiety disorders are frequently comorbid with other anxiety and depressive disorders, and some types of externalizing disorders

Anxiety Disorders

- ▶ Separation Anxiety Disorder
- ▶ Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- ▶ Social Anxiety Disorder
- ▶ Specific Phobia
- ▶ Panic Disorder
- ▶ Agoraphobia
- ▶ Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- ▶ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Separation Anxiety Disorder

- ▶ Developmentally inappropriate and excessive anxiety about separation from caregiver
- ▶ More common in younger children and girls
- ▶ May involve fear that something bad is going to happen to caregiver or nightmares with themes of separation
- ▶ May refuse to go to sleep or school for fear of being away from caregiver

Separation Anxiety at School

- ▶ Difficulty at school pick-up/drop off
- ▶ Frequent school absences
- ▶ Visibly upset upon separation
- ▶ Frequent reassurance seeking (“Is my parent okay?”)
- ▶ Visits nurse/calls home throughout the day

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

- ▶ Excessive worry about everyday life matters
- ▶ More common in adolescents
- ▶ Worry is hard to control
- ▶ Associated with physical symptoms (3 in adults, 1 in children)
 - ▶ Restlessness, easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, sleep disturbance

GAD at School

- ▶ Perfectionistic about work
- ▶ Avoids work for fear of making mistake
- ▶ Excessive worry about failure
- ▶ Frequent reassurance seeking
- ▶ Appears jittery, tense, unable to relax
- ▶ Catastrophizes about outcomes of routine situations
- ▶ Upset when mildly scolded

Social Anxiety (Social Phobia)

- ▶ Excessive fear of evaluation in social situations
- ▶ In children, anxiety must occur with peers, not just interaction with adults
- ▶ Exposure to feared situation almost always produces distress (in kids – crying, tantrums, freezing)
- ▶ Attempts to avoid social situations
- ▶ More common in adolescents and girls

Social Anxiety Disorder at School

- ▶ Extreme shyness/isolation
- ▶ Nervous in performance situations
- ▶ Avoids answering questions, asking for help, group work
- ▶ Hesitant to participate in social situations
- ▶ Difficulty with peer relationships

School Refusal/Avoidance

- ▶ More than just “school jitters”
 - ▶ Length of time and function of refusal are important
 - ▶ Different than truancy
- ▶ Often symptom of deeper problem
 - ▶ Associated with long-term consequences
- ▶ Affects 2-5% of children
 - ▶ Most common ages affected: 5-6, 10-11, or in times of transition

Addressing School Refusal

- ▶ Identify the function of refusal
 - ▶ What at school makes the youth nervous?
 - ▶ What steps can be taken to address the anxiety?
- ▶ Collaborate with parents
 - ▶ What happens when youth stays home?
 - ▶ Efforts should always be made to get anxious youth to school with consequences for staying home (e.g. no electronics)

Addressing School Refusal

- ▶ If necessary, reintegrate child gradually
 - ▶ Pick a part of the day to start
 - ▶ Gradually increase expectations
 - ▶ Provide rewards for attendance
 - ▶ No backsliding!
- ▶ “Sick” feelings may be anxiety symptoms
 - ▶ Kids can go home with: high fever, frequent vomiting, major injury/pain
 - ▶ Otherwise, stay in school!

Strategies for Schools: Outline

- ▶ Label and validate a child's emotions
- ▶ Break down anxious situations into small steps
- ▶ Avoid unnecessary accommodations

Label and Validate Emotions

- ▶ Youth often have difficulty identifying anxiety
 - ▶ May think they are sick
- ▶ Use compassion to validate
 - ▶ Avoid minimizing their distress by saying it is “silly” to be nervous
- ▶ Express confidence they can handle it

Label and Validate Emotions

- “It looks like you’re feeling pretty nervous. I know how hard tests are for you. Even though it’s hard, I know you can do this.”

Break Situations into Steps

- ▶ Avoiding scary situations makes fear worse
- ▶ A key part of overcoming anxiety is helping a youth re-enter feared situations in small, manageable steps
 - ▶ We call these “challenges” or exposures
 - ▶ Schools can do this too

Breaking Situations into Steps

- ▶ Identify a reasonable starting point
 - ▶ The first step should push the child slightly but be likely to be successful
- ▶ Continue to raise the bar as child is successful
- ▶ Practice as much as possible
 - ▶ The more we try things that are hard for us, the easier they get

Example: Oral Presentation

- ▶ Step 1: Practice presentation in front of parent, teacher, small group
- ▶ Step 2: Gradually increase the size or difficulty of the audience
- ▶ Step 3: Allow youth to go first or last when presenting in front of the whole class

Example: Frequent Nurse Visits

- ▶ Step 1: Monitor number of school nurse visits per day
- ▶ Step 2: Provide “nurse passes” to be used for visits, and provide a reward for unused passes at end of day
- ▶ Step 3: Gradually reduce number of passes, eventually providing rewards on days with no nurse visits

Example: Repeated Calls Home

- ▶ Step 1: Provide reward for every day stayed in school, regardless of phone calls home
- ▶ Step 2: Allow a certain number of calls at designated times
- ▶ Step 3: Gradually reduce calls home, rewarding child for days with no calls

Avoid Unnecessary Accommodations

- ▶ Accommodation: school and therapy
 - ▶ mandated by law in schools
 - ▶ often can be counter to the goal of therapy
 - ▶ may be a necessary support for the child's growth

Avoid Unnecessary Accommodations

- ▶ What accommodations are helpful?
 - ▶ helps a child achieve a goal, rather than removing expectations
 - ▶ asks “what does this child need to be successful” rather than “what does this child need to be less upset?”
 - ▶ is a moving target, removed when a kid no longer needs them to be successful

When is treatment needed?

- ▶ Are regular coping strategies insufficient to help with this child's anxiety?
- ▶ Is anxiety getting in the way at home, school, or with friends?
- ▶ Is anxiety causing the child and/or family a lot of distress?


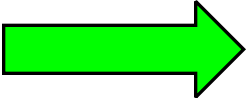
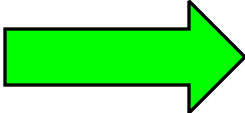
Treating Anxiety

- ▶ Positive effects have been found for medications and psychological treatment
- ▶ In one of our research studies
 - ▶ 60% of children with therapy improved
 - ▶ 60% of children on medication improved
 - ▶ 80% of children receiving both improved

Treating Anxiety - Medication

- ▶ SSRIs, such as Zoloft[®] (sertraline), help regulate neurotransmitters (chemical messengers in the brain)
- ▶ Generally well-tolerated
- ▶ Onset of effects takes about 4-8 weeks
- ▶ Approved by the FDA for children and adolescents with anxiety and OCD
- ▶ Should be managed by a pediatrician or psychiatrist

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

- ▶ Three aspects to anxiety
 - ▶ **Physical:** activation in sympathetic nervous system
 Relaxation
 - ▶ **Cognitive:** “Expecting bad things to happen”
 Cognitive restructuring
 - ▶ **Behavioral:** Avoidance of threat
 Problem Solving
Graded Exposure

Our therapy - The Coping Cat

- ▶ 16 week manualized treatment program
- ▶ First portion - psychoeducation
 - ▶ Learn to recognize the connection between thoughts, feelings, physical reactions in anxiety provoking situation
 - ▶ Learn coping strategies such as relaxation, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, etc.
- ▶ Second portion - exposure
 - ▶ Practice skills learned by gradually entering feared situations

Anxiety in Youth: Recap

- ▶ Anxiety can present as physical symptoms or avoidance as well as worries
- ▶ Goal is to help kids face their fears and reenter situations gradually
- ▶ Therapy and medication are both available and effective for kids who need extra support

CAADC

- ▶ Provides treatments for anxious youth ages 7-17
- ▶ Services are provided with fees set on a sliding scale.
- ▶ Frequently asked questions...
 - ▶ How do I know if a child will “qualify”?
 - ▶ What if a child does not qualify?
 - ▶ Who provides the treatment?
 - ▶ What does the clinic require in exchange for treatment?
 - ▶ Where is the clinic located?



CAADC Contact Information

www.childanxiety.org

OR

215-204-7165

Any
Questions?



Internet Resources

- ▶ Child Anxiety Tales:
 - ▶ <http://www.copingcatparents.com/>
- ▶ The Child Anxiety Network:
 - ▶ www.childanxiety.net
- ▶ New York University Child Study Center:
 - ▶ www.aboutourkids.org
- ▶ Anxiety Disorders Association of America:
 - ▶ www.adaa.org
- ▶ The Center for Mental Health Services:
 - ▶ www.mentalhealth.org

Books for Parents/Teachers

- ▶ *Helping your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents.* Rapee, Spence, Cobham, Wignall
- ▶ *Keys to Parenting an Anxious Child.* Manassis
- ▶ *Worried No More: Help and Hope for Anxious Children.* Wagner
- ▶ *The Silence Within: A Teacher/Parent Guide to Working with Selectively Mute and Shy Children.* Kervatt

Books for Parents/Teachers

- ▶ *Monsters Under the Bed and Other Childhood Fears: Helping your Child Overcome Anxieties, Fears, and Phobias.* Garber, Garber, & Spizman
- ▶ *Straight Talk about Psychiatric Medications for Kids.* Wilens.
- ▶ *Good Friends are Hard to Find: Help your Child Find, Make, and Keep Friends.* Frankel & Wetmore.

Books for Children

- ▶ *First Day Jitters.* Danneberg.
- ▶ *Wemberly Worried.* Henkes.
- ▶ *Scary Night Visitors: A Story for Children with Bedtime Fears.* Marcus, Marcus, & Jesche.
- ▶ *I Don't Know Why...I Guess I'm Shy: A Story About Taming Imaginary Fears.* Cain & Smith-Moore.
- ▶ *Into the Great Forest: A Story for Children Away from Parents for the First Time.* Marcus, Marcus, & Jesche.

Books for Children

- ▶ *Night Light: A Story for Children Afraid of the Dark.* Dutro & Boyle.
- ▶ *Cat's Got Your Tongue? A Story for Children Afraid to Speak.* Schaefer & Friedman.
- ▶ *Up and Down the Worry Hill.* Wagner. (OCD)
- ▶ *Kissing Doorknobs.* Hesser. (OCD – young adult)