

Mental Health Belongs to Us

Anxiety and the New School Year



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Issue #1

Feeling anxious about a new school year is common!

Any time we are about to start something new and strange and we are unsure what to expect or how we will cope, we can feel anxious, excited and/or stressed. A young child who may have never attended school will be exposed to many unknowns; new people, new demands, and do so alone and without the immediate presence of his or her family. Under these circumstances, it is normal to feel insecure about how to manage. Middle school and High School students feel anxious about things also, but can express this in different, often more internal and self-conscious ways. Parents can also feel stress both in response to their children's feelings and because of their own experiences at school. These stresses may be even more pronounced when the child is starting school, changing school, or when the family are newcomers. All that being said, our children are remarkably resilient! With support and encouragement, most children will find their way, cope well and grow from these experiences.



(Inglenook Student artwork representing anxiety)

What are the Signs of Anxiety?

Preschool and Elementary students

- Restless, irritable, agitated, or resistant
- Temper tantrums or extreme meltdowns
- May check to see if threat is there or seek reassurance
- Nightmares or sleep terrors possible
- Feeling physically ill (e.g., stomach aches)
- Trouble recognizing /verbalizing what they are feeling and why

Middle/High School students

- Has a more developed ability to internalize the anxiety response
- Worried, withdrawn, or complain of feeling sick (frequent stomachaches or other physical complaints)
- May have difficulty sleeping and be preoccupied
- May keep their worries and fears to themselves
- Anxiety is not only internalized, it may appear as 'acting out' behaviour

How to help alleviate anxious feelings

- Don't tell your child not to worry. Tell them it is normal and okay to feel anxious. Share that even you get worried sometimes when you are starting something new.
- Encourage kids to talk. Ask how your child feels about the new school year, accept and acknowledge them without judgment, helping them draw or speak their thoughts.
- Stay calm: Children pick up on parent's anxiety. Model optimism and confidence.
- Let your children know you care. For example, send personal notes in their lunch bags.
- Arrange play dates to help them make friends
- Teach relaxation techniques, such as:
 - slow deep breathing
 - taking a walk or physical activity can help reduce the physical feelings of anxiety
 - teach them (and model/practice) mindfulness through meditation
- Do some problem solving, anticipate the problem and suggest (or even role play) how to deal with it

When does anxiety become a problem: Knowing when to seek help

Anxious individuals chronically develop negative and distorted thinking patterns, behave in ways that react and help them cope with anxiety, and experience anxious emotions and physical reactions. They typically overestimate the risk or danger and underestimate or overlook their ability to cope. Sometimes situations can be overwhelming and parents are at a loss as to how they can help or are stretched to the point at which they do not have the resources to help. If anxiety lasts more than a month and does not show signs of going away, and if it interferes with functioning socially, academically, or in other activities of daily living, then it may be time to seek help.

In elementary aged children this looks like:

- More clingy throughout the day, has trouble going to sleep or insists on a parent staying with them
- Anxious feelings leads to avoidance, panic attacks or severe changes in behaviour
- If the child is not speaking at school or in class

In middle and secondary school children:

- If they are unusually and persistently nervous, worried, on edge, tense, sad, overwhelmed, angry, frustrated, irritable, or stressed
- Catastrophizing or consistently expecting the worst
- Often jumps to negative conclusions
- Personalizing bad experiences (ex. I am a loser, I will fail, I'm always alone)
- Lack of confidence in one's coping ability

If these problems persist, it may be time to talk to a teacher or school principal who can engage professional support services such as social worker and psychologist to support the student.

(Anxiety materials Provided by: David Schwartzbein, Chief of Psychological Services, Area D)

Anxiety Resources:

Children's Mental Health Ontario - <http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/>

eMental Health - <http://www.ementalhealth.ca/>

Anxiety BC - <http://www.anxietybc.com/>

School Mental Health Assist - <http://smh-assist.ca/>

Kids Help Phone - <http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/teens/home/splash.aspx>

The ABC's of Mental Health (Parent/Teacher Resources) - <http://www.hincksdellcrest.org/ABC/Welcome>

Ontario Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth Mental Health - <http://www.excellenceforchildandyouth.ca/>

Social Workers, Mental Health and Well-Being – System Support, Heather Johnson & Saleem Haniff
Interim Senior Manager – Professional Support Services, Marcia Powers-Dunlop
Executive Superintendent – Student Support Services and Care, Sandy Spyropoulos

“Talking to people and/or just being with friends often help us manage the effects of anxiety on our lives. Some of us have found that taking a nap is helpful. Many of us find that changing the way we think about anxiety is helpful.”

~ TDSB Student

Worry can give a
small thing
a big shadow.
Swedish proverb

A traumatic event can cause significant anxiety. Attached to this newsletter is a helpful resource to help parents navigate such incidents with their children entitled, “Speaking with your child about a critical or traumatic event.”

SPEAKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT A CRITICAL INCIDENT OR TRAUMATIC EVENT

Here are some suggestions for dealing with questions and concerns that may arise at home:

1. Bring up the topic at a time and place where a discussion can occur. If there are distractions, a shortage of time or if either you or your child are too tired or busy, the conversation may be interrupted.
2. Begin by questioning and listening. Open-ended questions are better than specific ones. It is better to ask, "How are you feeling about what happened?" than "Are you scared because of what happened?" Let your child tell you what they believe they know, how they learned it and how they are feeling. Don't rush to correct or reassure. Allow them to finish their thoughts.
3. Respond to what your child tells you. Their concerns may be specific or general, concrete or abstract, closely related to the crisis or related very little. Address what they are concerned about and try not to overload children with information or solutions. Talk to them with ideas they can handle at their age. If you help them with their concerns today they will likely share more in the future.
4. Be aware that new stresses may open old wounds. When a child is confronted with a crisis, losses and upsets from the past may be remembered. The child may, or may not wish to talk about these old issues.
5. It is normal for people to try to make sense of things when a serious loss occurs. Allow your child to share his or her ideas and speculations. Help them to separate what they know from what they are guessing about.
6. Talk about specific things you can do to make your child feel secure. Go over your home safety plan. Make sure they know that you and other adults will always be available. Revisit street proofing. Reassure realistically.
7. When a crisis hits close to home we all feel vulnerable. Certain tragic events, while extremely upsetting, are rare. It can be helpful to remember that this type of event is very rare and almost certainly will not happen again in the neighborhood.
8. Children deal with stress in many different ways and at different paces. While your child may not wish to talk today, he/she may wish to talk in weeks or days to come. Do checkups at least once a week for the next few weeks. Follow up discussions may be helpful.
9. Try to continue normal routines. Reaffirm family goals and spiritual values.