

TEACHER INFORMATION SHEET

CHILDREN'S ANXIETY - THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is an unpleasant emotion that is a response to threat. Everybody experiences some form of anxiety at some time in their life. Feeling anxious when there is a real threat motivates us into action to keep ourselves safe. Feeling anxious when there is an imagined threat is not productive.

PROBLEM ANXIETY

When feelings of anxiety happen most days, when they are particularly intense and distressing and interfere with what a child wants to do then it becomes a problem.

HOW CAN TEACHERS TELL IF A CHILD IS ANXIOUS?

Because anxiety is a feeling, teachers can only notice by a child's behaviour if they are anxious. This is very difficult to interpret as there is no one behaviour that only means anxiety. The most common behaviour is avoidance of what they are afraid of. But while some children will be shy, others will be disruptive in avoiding.

Anxious children also complain of stomach-aches and headaches, they excessively seek reassurance, often procrastinate and are sometimes perfectionists.

The Teachers Anxiety Checklist is a quick reminder of which behaviours could be symptomatic of anxiety but the behaviours might have other causes too.

HOW IS AN ANXIETY DISORDER DIAGNOSED?

Anxiety disorders in children are usually diagnosed by a psychologist or a psychiatrist. Many sources of information are sought such as from parents, teachers and the child to determine whether the behaviour fulfills the criteria of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (V).

Although there are many different kinds of anxiety disorders many children have multiple sources of worry. It is not important for teachers to be able to distinguish these except for school refusal which could be either the child being afraid of something at school OR fearing separation from their caregiver.

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WHAT IS THE TEACHER'S ROLE?

The teacher's role is to teach and care for their students. However, students with excessive anxiety cannot learn, so teachers can establish a classroom climate conducive to confident learning by:

Providing routines. This is second nature to teacher but provides a feeling of safety to anxious children. However, a well ordered classroom still needs flexibility and excitement and anxious children need a gradual challenge to change and be flexible.

Model making mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes but it is how we handle them that is important. Model learning from mistakes, not deriding others, create a "have-a-go" classroom.

Reward effort. Teachers rightly reward achievement but we say we prize effort but often don't reward it. Children who can't achieve highly often give up or won't try for fear of failure.

Teachers can give explicit instruction in social and emotional learning by:

Talking about fears and worries. Contrary to popular belief talking about anxiety does NOT increase it. Use teachable moments to discuss emotions such as before a test or concert and use books to discuss and teach about feelings.

Acknowledge feelings. If children are anxious, reassure them it is OK to feel that, question the concern and problem solve.

Conduct an Australian evidenced-based program such as Cool Kids or Friends for Life.

Teachers can refer anxious children for help by:

Talking to their parents to see if the child is anxious at home.

Talking to the school psychologist or counsellor. You don't have to diagnose, you just have to have a hunch.

Make adaptations. If the child is diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, work with the counsellor to assist them in the classroom.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Teaching tips for the prevention of anxiety in children at www.worrybusters.com

Small steps at www.wayahead.org.au

Black Dog at www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Cool Kids at www.mq.edu.au

Friends for Life at www.friendsresilience.org