

SCHOOL ANXIETY

Presented by Wildflowers Children's Therapy

FEATURED THIS MONTH:

Test Taking

Friendships

Homework

Reducing Stress



ANXIETY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SOCIAL USE OF LANGUAGE

It can become difficult to communicate when anxiety is overwhelming. Your child may be busy in their head with their own thoughts when attempting to send a message. They may hyper-focus on a speaker's message, as even one statement may be causing them anxiety. This distraction will likely cause your child to no longer listen to the rest of the conversation. Trying to say everything right when having anxious feelings is challenging, as often your child may have trouble getting the words or sounds out; they may literally stumble over their words. Having the knowledge of what successful communication is will help your child through the occasions their anxiety is evident. Well-developed conversational skills serve a highly social function and will increase your child's possibilities of being accepted by peers and developing friendship. Guide your child as they learn to use language appropriately for the context and following conversational rules. Having the awareness and ideas to have a successful conversation may reduce some anxiety your child is feeling. Here are essential elements to a conversation to think about:

- Using and understanding a vast array of vocabulary and word associations assist in the development of semantic networks to facilitate word retrieval.
- Using a variety of sentence types are essential to describing events, questioning, responding, and conversing. Understanding of sentence types with increasing complexity and structure are required for following directions, comprehending teacher instruction, and take notes.
- Comprehension consists of both decoding the syntactic and semantic information and then interpreting that information based on the context and incorporating experiences and world knowledge.
- The ability to orally produce and write coherent narratives becomes increasingly important for peer acceptance and academic performance. Retelling a story and later discussing the story are often critical to the success of an interaction.
- Using language appropriately for the communication context, determine which behaviors should be used in that particular context, and predict the responses or behaviors of the communication partner for the purposes of shaping subsequent interactions.

TOOLS FOR ANXIETY

Managing the Environment

- Operate on the child's time
- Establish routines (visual schedules)
- Simplify your language
- Set a calm, positive tone

Sensory Strategies

- Develop a sensory diet
- Home equipment (swing, rocker chair, quiet corner, mini trampoline, exercise ball, dimmer switches and/or natural lighting, aromatherapy)
- Consult an Occupational Therapist about a weighted vest, blanket, and other sensory tools.

Thinking Strategies

- Develop an understanding of emotions (self and others)
- Affective Educational (i.e., Incredible 5-point Scale, Fearometer)
- Develop understanding of how emotions affect the body

Calming Strategies

- Relax Body Relax Mind
- Develop relaxation skills (right time, make time, create a habit, create relaxing environment, make it fun, keep it short and simple)

Parent Strategies

- Caregiver check-in
- Time for talking is not when your child is upset
- Model what you want your child to do
- Encourage self-reliance in your child
- Develop self-calming plan
- Avoid exposure to family conflict
- Set a limit on reassurances

Most school divisions are administering pre and post assessments in September and June. Tests can be stressful for many children. It is always beneficial to remind your child that you only expect him/her to give their best effort! If you are noticing more severe signs of test anxiety, do not be afraid to connect your child's classroom teacher. School staff are happy to work with you to provide necessary test-taking accommodations (i.e. a quiet space to write, chunking the assessment into manageable parts, etc.). Teachers are educated in the use of deep breathing and other calming techniques and can work with school counsellor to find a best-fit strategy for your child.

The most common type of performance anxiety is math anxiety. Math anxiety interacts with other variables such as self-efficacy and motivation, which contributes to the worry and tension that many adolescents experience in regard to mathematics (Luttenberger, Wimmer, & Paechter, 2018). Trying to recall previously learned information when you are in a heightened warning state interferes with your concentration, thinking, memory and attention. Remember to breath, be confident and engage in positive self-talk to help replace negative thoughts.

"Normal Anxiety" is our bodies natural defense mechanism to threats in our environment. Being unable to control our thoughts and being in a heightened warning state for an extended amount of time is more "Abnormal Anxiety."

TIPS FOR STRESS FREE HOMEWORK

- Set-up a "Homework Zone" within your home. This space should be well-lit, quiet, and stocked with necessary supplies.
- Pre-schedule a designated homework time. Ensure your child takes necessary "brain breaks" during homework sessions and set a timer. The frequency of these breaks depends on both age and individual need (usually about 3-5 minutes of break time per year of a child's age).
- Attend family-teacher conferences and read home-school communication to ensure your child understands teacher expectations.
- Use positive reinforcement for task completion - whether this is verbal praise, a token system, or a little treat!

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOUR CHILD?

- Help your child acquire knowledge by knowing what is being taught at school and then discussing those curricular themes into supper time and other relaxed conversations.

- Your child will benefit from reading, which will build knowledge and promote conversational topic initiation and maintenance. Reading will also increase understanding and usage of a variety of words, thus building lexicon and sufficient word retrieval during sentence production. Encourage your child to request a definition when encountering words not understood.

- Your child would benefit from recognizing nonverbal cues. Have your child watch a portion of a movie with the sound off and identify the emotions in the characters by watching their facial expressions and body language. Have your child re-enact the scenario using appropriate language to the physical context and the mood of the listener.

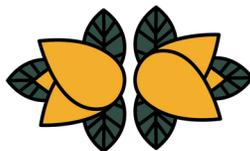
- Have your child role-play scenarios to help practice the language required to send the desired message. Not all social situations can be rehearsed, but with practice and the use of the ideas below your child may be able to apply them to novel interactions. Think about and discuss the following as you go through the role-play:

- o Determine a goal. What do you want? To apologize? To borrow something? To tell a story? To talk someone into doing something?
- o Observe the other person and the situation. Are they listening? Do they seem to be in a bad mood? Are they agreeing with you? What do you hear them say or ask? What do you see in their face? What is going on around you? Is this the right place and time to say what you want to say?
- o Create and send your message. Do you need to be extra careful or polite? Are you sticking to the point? Do you need to ask, explain, tell how you're feeling, or persuade someone?
- o Self-correct, if needed, by saying, "I didn't think that came out right. What I meant to say was...."

- Another way to prepare for interactions is to use a comic strip. Draw an ongoing conversation with your child. This can be a fun way to prepare for role playing. You can draw the characters emotions on their faces and discuss reactions based on the words shared.

"Large class sizes and complex student populations in Saskatchewan schools have resulted in increased visual and auditory stimuli. While classroom teachers are using all possible tools and strategies to manage these factors, many children are feeling overwhelmed. If your child is indicating that he/she is anxious in the classroom, practice self-advocacy skills at home (i.e. approaching their teacher: "Is there a quieter space available where I can finish my work?" "May I use the headphones?"). Most classrooms have adaptations such as noise cancelling headphones or "Calm Corners" for students to use freely, but sometimes kids are shy to ask!"

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CHILDREN'S THERAPY
