



The Mind Hub

By



Topic: Understanding and Addressing School Anxiety: A Guide for Parents, Students, and Teachers

As we transition to the second semester of our school year, it is common for many students to experience increased stress/burnouts related to their studies. From the younger children in the Kindergarten & Primary all the way to the students in the Secondary school, there are tendencies to associate the school environment with stress, pressure, and overall negative feelings. While a certain amount of stress is normal, too much can negatively impact their mental and physical well-being; causing some children to try and avoid coming into school altogether. As parents, it's important to understand how school anxiety can affect your child and learn strategies to help them cope.

❖ What is School Anxiety?

- School anxiety refers to a heightened feeling of fear or unease related to school. This type of anxiety is common in children and adolescents and can manifest in a variety of ways, both emotionally and physically. It is often related to specific situations, such as the start of a new school year, taking tests, giving presentations, or interacting with peers. However, in some cases, school anxiety can become more generalized, affecting the student's overall experience at school.
- There are the various reasons why a child might experience school anxiety. These can include:
 - Social Fears: worries about making friends, fitting in, or being judged by others.
 - Academic Pressure: anxiety about grades, tests, and performance in the classroom.
 - Separation Anxiety: distress when leaving a parent or caregiver.
 - Fear of Failure: a feeling that they will not live up to expectations or might disappoint others.

- Bullying: past or current experiences of being bullied can lead to a fear or going to school
- Overwhelming Expectations: a child may feel stressed due to high standards set by teachers, parents, or themselves.
- While anxiety is a natural response to stress, when it becomes chronic or overwhelming, it can interfere with a student's ability to function effectively at school, impacting their academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being.

How to Help a Child with School Anxiety

- **Recognise the Signs of Anxiety:**
 - Recognizing that a child may be struggling with school anxiety is the first step toward helping them. Some common signs include:
 - Frequent headaches, stomach-aches, or other physical complaints.
 - Avoiding school or asking to stay home.
 - Sudden mood changes or irritability.
 - Difficulty sleeping or nightmares.
 - Tearfulness or outbursts before school.
 - Complaints about school-related activities, such as homework, tests, or social events.
- **Open a Line of Communication:**
 - Children may not always be able to express their fears or worries clearly. It's important to foster an open and supportive environment where they feel safe sharing their feelings. Ask them gently about their experiences at school, and listen actively without judgment. This helps children feel heard and understood, which can reduce their anxiety.
- **Normalise Anxiety:**
 - It's important for children to understand that feeling anxious sometimes is a natural part of life. Reassure them that they are not alone in feeling this way,

and many students feel anxious about school. Talking about school anxiety openly can help de-stigmatize it and reduce feelings of isolation.

➤ **Break Tasks into Manageable Steps:**

- If a child is feeling overwhelmed by assignments, tests, or social situations, break tasks down into smaller, more manageable steps. This can reduce the pressure they feel and help them see the situation as less daunting. For example, rather than focusing on finishing an entire project at once, encourage them to focus on completing one small part of it at a time.

➤ **Practice Relaxation Techniques:**

- Teaching students relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or mindfulness can help reduce their anxiety in real-time. Encourage them to use these strategies before or during school if they begin to feel overwhelmed. Teaching relaxation techniques not only provides immediate relief but also gives children tools they can use to cope in stressful situations throughout their lives.

➤ **Create a Consistent Routine:**

- Children with school anxiety often feel comforted by predictable routines. A consistent morning routine can help ease their transition into the school day. Try to keep morning preparations simple and calm, and make sure there is enough time to avoid rushing. Routines that include time for relaxation in the evening, such as reading or unwinding, can also help alleviate anxiety before bed.

➤ **Encourage Social Connection:**

- One of the most challenging aspects of school anxiety for many students is social situations. Encourage children to form friendships and participate in group activities. Role-playing different scenarios (such as how to approach a

peer or join a group) can build confidence. It may also help to provide reassurance that making mistakes in social settings is normal and part of growing up.

➤ **Involve Teachers and School Staff:**

- Teachers and school staff play a vital role in supporting students with anxiety.

It is important to collaborate with them to ensure the child feels supported in the classroom. A teacher might provide a quiet space for a student to calm down during overwhelming situations, or offer additional time to complete assignments. Be open with school staff about your child's struggles, and work together to find solutions.

❖ **FAQs**

1. *Q. How do I know if my child's anxiety is severe enough to require professional help?*

- A. If your child's anxiety is persistent and interfering with their ability to go to school, participate in class, or maintain relationships, it may be helpful to consult a mental health professional. Symptoms such as frequent school refusal, significant changes in behaviour, or difficulty functioning at home or school should be addressed by a psychologist, or paediatrician who specializes in childhood anxiety.

2. *Q. My child says they feel sick every morning before school. Could this be anxiety?*

- A. Yes, physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach-aches, or nausea are common signs of anxiety in children. These symptoms are often triggered by the anticipation of stress-inducing situations, such as going to school. If your child regularly experiences these physical symptoms before school, it may be worth talking to them about their fears and concerns. If the symptoms persist, consulting with a healthcare provider is recommended.

3. *Q. Can school anxiety be prevented?*

- A. While it's difficult to completely prevent anxiety, creating a supportive environment at home and school can reduce the likelihood of anxiety becoming overwhelming. Encourage your child to express their feelings, model healthy coping strategies, and maintain a consistent routine. Additionally, teaching problem-solving and coping skills from a young age can equip children with the tools they need to manage anxiety effectively.

4. *Q. What role can parents play in helping a child with school anxiety?*

- A. As a parent, your support is crucial in helping your child manage their anxiety. Start by being an active listener, acknowledging your child's fears, and offering reassurance. Encourage healthy coping mechanisms, such as relaxation exercises and positive self-talk, and work closely with teachers and school staff. Consistency in routines and positive reinforcement for small successes can also foster a sense of control and confidence in your child.

5. *Q. How can teachers help students with school anxiety in the classroom?*

- A. Teachers can provide a calm and supportive classroom environment where students feel safe. This includes giving students time to calm down if they become anxious, offering encouragement, and providing structure and predictability in the classroom. Teachers can also be proactive in checking in with students who may show signs of anxiety and offering help when needed. Additionally, creating opportunities for positive social interactions and recognizing individual strengths can boost self-esteem and reduce feelings of anxiety.

❖ **Final Thoughts.**

By understanding school anxiety and taking proactive steps to support students, we can help them overcome their fears and thrive in the school environment. Working together as parents, teachers, and school staff, we can create a supportive community that allows children to feel secure and confident as they navigate the challenges of school life. If you have any concerns about your child's stress levels or would like further resources, don't hesitate to reach out to the school psychologist.

- The Mind Hub, by Marina Stavrou

