

Anxiety & Its Impact on School Systems

What Is Anxiety?

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines anxiety as "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure."

Since the earliest days of humanity, the approach of predators and incoming danger sets off alarms in the body and allows evasive action. These alarms become noticeable in the form of a raised heart-beat, sweating, and increased sensitivity to surroundings.

The danger causes a rush of adrenalin, a hormone and chemical messenger in the brain, which in turn triggers these anxious reactions in a process called the "fight-or-flight" response. This prepares humans to physically confront or flee any potential threats to safety.

Types of Anxiety

Generalized anxiety disorder: This is a chronic disorder involving excessive, long-lasting anxiety and worries about nonspecific life events, objects, and situations. GAD is the most common anxiety disorder, and people with the disorder are not always able to identify the cause of their anxiety.

Panic disorder: Brief or sudden attacks of intense terror and apprehension characterize panic disorder. These attacks can lead to shaking, confusion, dizziness, nausea, and breathing difficulties. Panic attacks tend to occur and escalate rapidly, peaking after ten minutes. However, a panic attack might last for hours.

Specific phobia: This is an irrational fear and avoidance of a particular object or situation. Phobias are not like other anxiety disorders, as they relate to a specific cause.

Agoraphobia: This is a fear and avoidance of places, events, or situations from which it may be difficult to escape or in which help would not be available if a person becomes trapped. People often misunderstand this condition as a phobia of open spaces and the outdoors, but it is not so simple.

Selective mutism: This is a form of anxiety that some children experience, in which they are not able to speak in certain places or contexts, such as school, even though they may have excellent verbal communication skills around familiar people. It may be an extreme form of social phobia.

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Causes of School Anxiety

Social Stressors

Many kids experience some level of stress or anxiety in social situations they encounter in school. While some of these issues provide important opportunities for growth, they must be handled with care and can cause anxiety that must be dealt with.

Teachers

A good experience with a caring teacher can cause a lasting impression on a child's life—so can a bad experience. While most teachers do their best to provide students with a positive educational experience, some students are better suited for certain teaching styles and classroom types than others. If there's a mismatch between student and teacher, a child can form lasting negative feelings about school or his own abilities.

Friends

While most students would say that friends are one of their favorite aspects of school, they can also be a source of stress. Concerns about not having enough friends, not being in the same class as friends, not being able to keep up with friends in one particular area or another, interpersonal conflicts, and peer pressure are a few of the very common ways kids can be stressed by their social lives at school. Dealing with these issues alone can cause anxiety in even the most secure kids.

Bullies

Things have changed in the world of bullies. The good news is that the days of teachers looking the other way and parents leaving kids to deal with bullying on their own are mostly over. Many schools now have anti-bullying programs and policies. Though bullying does still happen at many schools, even those with these policies, help is generally more easily accessible than it was years ago.

Overscheduling

Much has been said in the media lately about the over-scheduling of our kids, but the problem still continues. In an effort to give their kids an edge, or to provide the best possible developmental experiences, many parents are enrolling their kids in too many extra-curricular activities. As kids become teens, school extra-curricular activities become much more demanding. College admissions standards are also becoming increasingly competitive, making it difficult for college-bound high school students to avoid overscheduling themselves.

Lack of Family Time

Due in part to the busyness of kids' lives and the hectic schedules of most parents, the sit-down family dinner has become the exception rather than the rule in many households. While there are other ways to connect as a family, many families find that they're too busy to spend time together and have both the important discussions and the casual day recaps that can be so helpful for kids in dealing with the issues they face. Due to a lack of available family time, many parents aren't as connected to their kids, or knowledgeable about the issues they face, as they would like.

Not Enough Sleep

Unfortunately, this isn't just a problem that adults face. As schedules pack up with homework, extracurriculars, family time and (hopefully) some downtime each day, kids often get less sleep than they need. Operating under a sleep deficit doesn't just mean sleepiness, it can also lead to poor cognitive functioning, lack of coordination, moodiness, and other negative effects. Consider helping your family adopt some habits for better sleep.

