

POLICY BRIEF

June 5th, 2020



SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference

Creating a Welcoming School and Classroom Environment During COVID-19

by Erin Nation

Even before the pandemic of COVID-19, anxiety was the most prevalent psychiatric condition among children today, affecting as many as 20% of children.¹ Anxiety does not go away without treatment, but in fact worsens over time and has adverse effects on cardiac, immune, and respiratory functioning.² Anxiety disorders are also the primary psychiatric condition in adults, and the majority of adults with an anxiety disorder report that their symptoms started in childhood.

It can be expected that living through a traumatic experience such as the COVID-19 pandemic will increase or induce anxiety in children. However, anxiety disorders are also the most treatable psychiatric condition, and there are concrete steps educators can take to address students experiencing mental health challenges.³

Educators should know and be able to recognize the signs of childhood stress in order to identify students in need of support and assistance. Physical symptoms include headaches, upset stomachs, and stuttering, while emotional symptoms include crying, new or recurring fears, and an unwillingness to participate in family or school activities.⁴ Anxiety can present in a variety of ways and no two children are exactly alike in this respect. However, noticing common signs of anxiety, such as worries or concerns about family, school, friends, or activities, fears of embarrassment or making mistakes and low self-esteem or lack of self-confidence, can prepare teachers to better support their students.⁵

Teachers and administrators can prepare for the return of all students by creating a welcoming classroom and school environment that may include:

Opportunities for daily check-in/check-outs with classroom teacher or other school

personnel: Students check-in in daily with their teacher or a staff member, such as a counselor

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

or Assistant Principal to ensure the student is prepared and ready to learn. Check-in adults should consider walking and talking with students, rather than always meeting in an office setting. The student then checks out with the same staff member at the end of the school day to summarize the day and prepare or get “pumped up” for the next day.

Morning classroom meetings that set the stage for the day and build the foundation for a classroom community: Morning meetings are also an opportunity to provide a schedule for the day’s activities, like adults, children like to know what is expected of them and what to prepare for each day. Morning meetings could also include opportunities to get moving, as exercise is helpful in managing anxiety.

A cool down spot with a coping skills toolbox: Cool down spots can be located within the classroom, but also in spaces around the school building, such as in the library or cafeteria. The toolkit should include age-appropriate materials that help to deescalate intense emotion such as pages for coloring, journaling prompts, fidgets, and feelings charts.

Lessons on coping skills, including opportunities to practice deep breathing: Teaching coping skills (strategies for handling difficult emotions) before emotions escalate is most beneficial. These skills can range from breathing techniques to slowly counting to 10 to using a stress ball. Students can find empowerment in selecting the coping skills that work best for them.

Books on managing emotions: There are many benefits in literature about managing emotions for children to be able to identify and relate to feelings and the book characters.

A change in speech: Instead of phrases such as “*calm down*” or “*relax*,” using phrases that help identify emotions such as “*It seems you are really feeling like this is too scary right now,*” is more beneficial to students with anxiety.

The validation of feelings: Like changing what we say, it’s important how we say things to children. It’s important to acknowledge and validate their big emotions. Consider phrases like: “*I know you are feeling scared. That’s not a good feeling. I want to help you.*”

The practice of mindfulness and daily gratitude: Teachers can set aside time each day to give students the opportunity to practice mindfulness through focusing their attention and calming as well as time for daily gratitude to focus on things and people they are thankful for.

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

Assist with positive self-talk: Teachers can model positive self-talk to their students such as “*This virus is very serious, but we don’t need to be scared, we need to be responsible by doing things like washing our hands.*”

An open space for questions: Let students know that this is a safe place, and while we may not have all of the answers, it’s okay to ask questions.

Encourage hope: While difficult situations can have negative results, they can also have positive outcomes. Model an optimistic attitude and look forward to the future.

Teachers and administrators should also practice self-care. As NATAL-Israel’s Trauma and Resiliency Center notes, no one is immune to emotions triggered by hardship. Acknowledge and attend to your own reactions and feelings. Share with children the strategies you use to cope with your distress. Seek assistance if you are experiencing feelings that are overwhelming or difficult to manage.⁶

Erin Nation is a practicing elementary school counselor in Oklahoma. She also has experience at the state level as the Director of Early Childhood and has taught Kindergarten.

¹ Chansky, T. E. (2004). *Freeing your child from anxiety*. New York: Broadway Books.

² Irwin, R. S., & Rippe, J. M. (2017). *Irwin and Rippe's intensive care medicine* (8th ed.). Philadelphia: Wolters Kluwer Health/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

³ Medline Plus Medical Encyclopedia (2006). Stress in childhood. Retrieved March 24, 2008, from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002059.htm>

⁴ Medline Plus Medical Encyclopedia (2006). Stress in childhood. Retrieved March 24, 2008, from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002059.htm>

⁵ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2020). Facts for families: Anxiety and children. Retrieved May 20, 2020 from https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/The-Anxious-Child-047.aspx

⁶ NATAL-Israel’s Trauma and Resiliency Center (nd). Supporting your children in times of stress. Retrieved May 20, 2020 from <https://www.afnatal.org/wp-content/uploads/Supporting-your-children-in-times-of-stress.pdf>