Anxiety in the Classroom
(childmind.org)

What it looks like, and why it's often mistaken for something else by Rachel Ehmke

Sometimes anxiety is easy to identify — like when a child is feeling nervous before a test at school. Other times anxiety in the classroom can look like something else entirely — an upset stomach, disruptive or angry behavior, ADHD, or even a learning disorder.

There are many different kinds of anxiety, which is one of the reasons it can be hard to detect in the classroom. What they all have in common, says neurologist and former teacher Ken Schuster, PsyD, is that anxiety “tends to lock up the brain,” making school hard for anxious kids.

Children can struggle with:

- **Separation anxiety**: When children are worried about being separated from caregivers. These kids can have a hard time at school drop-offs and throughout the day.
- **Social anxiety**: When children are excessively self-conscious, making it difficult for them to participate in class and socialize with peers.
- **Selective mutism**: When children have a hard time speaking in some settings, like at school around the teacher.
- **Generalized anxiety**: When children worry about a wide variety of everyday things. Kids with generalized anxiety often worry particularly about school performance and can struggle with perfectionism.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder**: When children’s minds are filled with unwanted and stressful thoughts. Kids with OCD try to alleviate their anxiety by performing compulsive rituals like counting or washing their hands.
- **Specific phobias**: When children have an excessive and irrational fear of particular things, like being afraid of animals or storms.

**Inattention and restlessness**: When a child is squirming in his seat and not paying attention, we tend to think of ADHD, but anxiety could also be the cause. When kids are anxious in the classroom, they might have a hard time focusing on the lesson and ignoring the worried thoughts overtaking their brains. “Some kids might appear really ‘on’ at one point but then they can suddenly drift away, depending on what they’re feeling anxious about,” says Dr. Schuster. “That looks like inattention, and it is, but it’s triggered by anxiety.”

**Attendance problems and clingy kids**: It might look like truancy, but for kids for whom school is a big source of anxiety, refusing to go to school is also pretty common. School refusal rates tend to be higher after vacations or sick days, because kids have a harder time coming back after a few days away.

Going to school can also be a problem for kids who have trouble separating from their parents. Some amount of separation anxiety is normal, but when kids don’t adjust to separation over time and their anxiety makes going to school difficult or even impossible, it becomes a real problem. Kids with separation anxiety may also feel compelled to use their phones throughout the day to check in with their parents.

**Disruptive behavior**: Acting out is another thing we might not associate with anxiety. But when a student is compulsively kicking the chair of the kid in front of him, or throws a tantrum whenever the schedule is ignored or a classmate isn’t following the rules, anxiety may well be the cause. Similarly, kids who are feeling anxious might ask a lot of questions, including repetitive ones, because they are feeling worried and want reassurance.

Anxiety can also make kids aggressive. When children are feeling upset or threatened and don’t know how to handle their feelings, their fight or flight response to protect themselves can kick in — and some kids are more likely to fight. They might attack another child or a teacher, throw things, or push over a desk because they’re feeling out of control.
Trouble answering questions in class: Sometimes kids will do perfectly well on tests and homework, but when they’re called on in class teachers hit a wall. There are several different reasons why this might happen.

"Back when I was teaching, I would notice that when I had to call on someone, or had to figure out who’s turn it was to speak, it was like the anxious kid always tended to disappear," says Dr. Schuster. "The eager child is making eye contact, they’re giving you some kind of physical presence in the room like ‘Call on me, call on me!’ But when kids are anxious about answering questions in class, ‘they’re going to break eye contact, they might look down, they might start writing something even though they’re not really writing something. They’re trying to break the connection with the teacher in order to avoid what’s making them feel anxious.’"

If they do get called on, sometimes kids get so anxious that they freeze. They might have been paying attention to the lesson and they might even know the answer, but when they’re called on their anxiety level becomes so heightened that they can’t respond.

Frequent trips to the nurse: Anxiety can manifest in physical complaints, too. If a student is having unexplained headaches, nausea, stomachaches, or even vomiting, those could be symptoms of anxiety. So can a racing heart, sweaty palms, tense muscles, and being out of breath.

Problems in certain subjects: When a child starts doubting her abilities in a subject, anxiety can become a factor that gets in the way of her learning or showing what she knows. Sometimes this can be mistaken for a learning disorder when it’s really just anxiety.

However anxiety can also go hand in hand with learning disorders. When kids start noticing that something is harder for them than the other kids, and that they are falling behind, they can understandably get anxious. The period before a learning disorder is diagnosed can be particularly stressful for kids.

Not turning in homework: When a student doesn’t turn in her homework, it could be because she didn’t do it, but it could also be because she is worried that it isn’t good enough. Likewise, anxiety can lead to second guessing — an anxious child might erase his work over and over until there’s a hole in the paper — and spending so much time on something that it never gets finished. We tend to think of perfectionism as a good thing, but when children are overly self-critical it can sabotage even the things they are trying their hardest at, like school work.

You might also notice that some anxious kids will start worrying about tests much earlier than their classmates and may begin dreading certain assignments, subjects, or even school itself.

Avoiding socializing or group work: Some kids will avoid or even refuse to participate in the things that make them anxious. This includes obvious anxiety triggers like giving presentations, but also things like gym class, eating in the cafeteria, and doing group work.

When kids start skipping things it might look to their teachers and peers like they are uninterested or underachieving, but the opposite might be true. Sometimes kids avoid things because they are afraid of making a mistake or being judged.

Dr. Schuster notes that when kids get anxious in social situations, sometimes they have a much easier time showing what they know when teachers engage them one-to-one, away from the group.
What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

How to respect feelings without empowering fears by Clark Goldstein, PhD

When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning parents can fall into a negative cycle and, not wanting a child to suffer, actually exacerbate the youngster’s anxiety. It happens when parents, anticipating a child’s fears, try to protect her from them. Here are pointers for helping children escape the cycle of anxiety.

1. The goal isn’t to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it: None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety isn’t to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It’s to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they’re anxious. And as a byproduct of that, the anxiety will decrease or fall away over time.

2. Don’t avoid things just because they make a child anxious: Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset, starts to cry—not to be manipulative, but just because that’s how she feels—and her parents whisk her out of there, or remove the thing she’s afraid of, she’s learned that coping mechanism, and that cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

3. Express positive—but realistic—expectations: You can’t promise a child that his fears are unrealistic—that he won’t fail a test, that he’ll have fun ice skating, or that another child won’t laugh at him during show & tell. But you can express confidence that he’s going to be okay, he will be able to manage it, and that, as he faces his fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives him confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you’re not going to ask him to do something he can’t handle.

4. Respect her feelings, but don’t empower them: It’s important to understand that validation doesn’t always mean agreement. So if a child is terrified about going to the doctor because she’s due for a shot, you don’t want to belittle her fears, but you also don’t want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic, help her understand what she’s anxious about, and encourage her to feel that she can face her fears. The message you want to send is, “I know you’re scared, and that’s okay, and I’m here, and I’m going to help you get through this.”

5. Don’t ask leading questions: Encourage your child to talk about his feelings, but try not to ask leading questions—“Are you anxious about the big test? Are you worried about the science fair?” To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: “How are you feeling about the science fair?”

6. Don’t reinforce the child’s fears: What you don’t want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: “Maybe this is something that you should be afraid of.” Let’s say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time she’s around a dog, you might be anxious about how she will respond, and you might unintentionally send a message that she should, indeed, be worried.

7. Encourage the child to tolerate her anxiety: Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what he wants or needs to do. It’s really encouraging him to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the “habituation curve”—it will drop over time as he continues to have contact with the stressor. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that’s how we get over our fears.

8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short: When we’re afraid of something, the hardest time is really before we do it. So another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory
period. If a child is nervous about going to a doctor’s appointment, you don’t want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go; that’s likely to get your child more keyed up. So just try to shorten that period to a minimum.

9. Think things through with the child: Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child’s fear came true—how would she handle it? A child who’s anxious about separating from her parents might worry about what would happen if they didn’t come to pick her up. So we talk about that. If your mom doesn’t come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? “Well I would tell the coach my mom’s not here.” And what do you think the coach would do? “Well he would call my mom. Or he would wait with me.” A child who’s afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick her up can have a code word from her parents that anyone they sent would know. For some kids, having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety: There are multiple ways you can help kids handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Kids are perceptive, and they’re going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you can’t handle the stress or the anxiety. I’m not saying to pretend that you don’t have stress and anxiety, but let kids hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.

For more information: childmind.org
Why Childhood Anxiety Often Goes Undetected (and the Consequences)

Kids often keep their worries hidden, or express them in ways that are hard to read by Roy Boorady, MD

It is a natural thing to have anxiety. It is normal for very young children to be afraid of the dark, or for school-age children to worry about making friends. But sometimes normal childhood anxiety morphs into something more serious. A young girl might be afraid to ever leave her mother’s side, even to get on the school bus, or an anxious boy may need frequent reassurance over things that happened a month ago.

Kids can develop an anxiety disorder. Eventually the disorder can start interfering with a child’s friendships, life at home, and work in school. Even so, the anxiety still might not be noticeable to parents and caregivers.

For one thing, being anxious doesn’t necessarily mean that you can’t function—it might just make some kinds of functioning more difficult. A homework assignment that should take twenty minutes might take an hour, for example. With anxiety, it’s important to remember how internal it is. It dominates a child’s thoughts, but it might not be obvious to the people around her.

It’s also worth noting that in my work as a child psychiatrist I see a lot of anxious kids who are still basically happy and enjoying life. Maybe they are only struggling in certain situations, which may make their anxiety all the easier to overlook.

Outward signs of childhood anxiety: When anxiety is expressed outwardly, there can be a wide range of signs and symptoms, which often complicates identification:

- Kids may have trouble sleeping or complain about stomachaches or other physical problems.
- They may become avoidant and clingy around parents or caregivers.
- They might also have trouble focusing in class or be very fidgety—I like to say, “Not all that moves is ADHD,” even though that’s often the first thing we suspect from a hyperactive or inattentive child.
- They may have explosive outbursts that make people think they are oppositional, when their fight-or-flight mechanism is triggered.

The words we use to describe our anxiety can distract, too. People use a lot of different words to describe what they’re feeling—kids might say they are self-conscious, shy, apprehensive, worried, or afraid. These words do a good job capturing what they are struggling with, but fixating too much on them can distract from the fact that anxiety is underlying factor—not some personal failure in personality.

Consequences of untreated anxiety: If you look at the prevalence rates of anxiety disorders, you’ll see that the numbers rise as children get older. That makes sense because anxiety disorders are cognitive, so they develop as our cognitive ability develops. Separation anxiety, for instance, develops early, whereas social anxiety disorder usually develops after puberty. A study of more than 10,000 kids, interviewed by trained professionals, shows that more than 30 percent had developed an anxiety disorder some time before they were 18.

Anxiety frequently recurs, too, and childhood anxiety is often a precursor for adult anxiety, especially for kids who don’t receive treatment. The same study showed that 80 percent of kids with anxiety do not get treatment. Many adults seeking help for anxiety remember feeling anxious when they were younger, which means that they’ve been struggling for a long time and could have benefited from treatment as children.

Avoidance reinforces anxiety: Kids with untreated anxiety also begin to develop poor coping skills. A common example is avoidance—people who are very anxious will try to contain it by avoiding the thing that makes them anxious. It’s a short-term solution that unfortunately reinforces their anxiety instead of acclimating them to it. Similarly, untreated anxiety can lead to lower self-esteem, academic dysfunction, and self-medication through substance abuse.
Anxiety leads to depression: People living with anxiety for extended periods of time are also more likely to develop depression. It isn’t uncommon to meet patients who come seeking treatment for depression or depressive symptoms and it turns out that they have been dealing with lifelong anxiety as well. In cases like this people need treatment for anxiety and depression.

Fortunately, we know a lot about how to treat anxiety. It responds very well to cognitive behavior therapy, and there are medications that work, too. Getting help makes a big difference, and treatment doesn’t need to be a lifelong thing—although its positive effects will be.

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