

Teacher's Guide to Back-to-School Anxiety

Types of Anxiety

There are many different kinds of anxiety which is why it can be hard to detect it in the classroom. What they all have in common is that anxiety “locks up the brain”, making school harder.

Children commonly struggle with:

- Separation Anxiety- worried about being separated from caregivers
- Social Anxiety- Excessively self-conscious
- Selective Mutism- Hard time speaking in some settings
- Generalized Anxiety- Worry about a wide variety of everyday things, school performance and can struggle with perfectionism.
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder- Minds are filled with unwanted thoughts, kids try to alleviate anxiety by performing compulsive acts
Specific Phobias-Excessive and irrational fears of particular things

Signs and Clues of Anxiety

Inattention and Restlessness

When a child is restless and has a hard time sitting still in class we think of ADHD, when kids are anxious in the classroom, they might have a hard time focusing on the lesson due to the worried thoughts taking over their brain.

Attendance problems

It might look like truancy, but for kids for whom school is a big source of anxiety refusing to go to school is common. These absences tend to increase after school breaks or sick days due to having a hard time coming back

“Clingy” Children

Some children have a hard time separating from their parents. Some anxiety is normal especially at the beginning of the year, but should adjust over time. This has increased especially after spending more time together during the past few years.

Disruptive Behavior

When a student is compulsively kicking the chair or throwing a tantrum when the schedule is changed or ignored, anxiety could be the cause. These students may ask frequent questions due to wanting/needing reassurance. Often when a child feels anxious their flight or fight kicks in and could be more likely to fight.

Trouble Answering Questions in Class

When kids are anxious about answering questions in class they might break eye contact, they might look down, or start writing/doodling as a distraction. These students are trying to break connection with the teacher in order to avoid the anxious thought. Some students freeze, they could have been paying attention and know the answer but anxiety prevents them from answering.

Frequent Trips to the Nurse

Anxiety can manifest in physical ways causing unexplained headaches, nausea, stomachaches, 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 learning disorder 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 be because they are worried it isn't good enough. Anxiety can lead to second guessing; an anxious student might erase his work over and over again. They worry about tests and assignments earlier than other classmates.

Avoiding Socializing or Group Work

Some kids avoid or refuse to participate in the things that make them anxious i.e giving presentations, gym class, eating in the cafeteria and doing group work. This can look like they are uninterested or underachieving but they might avoid things due to anxiety.

COVID-19 Anxiety

When kids go out now, they're often reminded not to get too close to other people, to keep their masks on, to use sanitizer, to wash their hands. There is a lot of anxiety in the air, and kids feel that. I think they are wondering: Are we sure it's safe to go back? And are other people safe? And is it safe to touch this?"

So, parents and teachers have a complicated mission dealing with all this anxiety and uncertainty: reassuring children that it's safe, while also encouraging them to be careful and preparing them to be flexible in case the situation changes.