
Anxiety: Tips for Teachers

Supporting anxious pupils in the classroom

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Understanding anxiety in the classroom

It is normal for everyone to feel anxious sometimes, but some children worry more than others, and it can get in the way of learning. School worries may include performance, social situations, or what peers think of them. Children may also carry worries from home into school — concerns about a parent, or something they overheard the night before.

Signs and symptoms to watch out for

Anxiety looks different in every child. Watch out for tears, difficulty separating from parents, withdrawal from peers, poor concentration, fidgeting, changes in appetite, tiredness, irritability, angry outbursts, and physical complaints such as stomach aches or frequent requests to use the toilet. You may also notice negative self-talk ("I'm not good at Maths", "No one wants to play with me") and avoidance of feared situations such as group work or reading aloud.

Create a calming corner and coping box

If space allows, designate a cosy spot in the classroom where children can go when they start to feel anxious — blankets, cushions, and soft lighting help. Establish a clear signal (such as a time-out card) so children can let you know when they need it.

A coping box — filled with sensory items such as playdough, lavender bags, stress balls, fidget toys, colouring pages, and positive affirmation cards — can work alongside the calming corner or on its own. Encourage children to focus on their senses when using it, to shift attention away from worries.

Use mindfulness and breathing techniques

Encourage children to notice signs of anxiety and intentionally redirect their attention to the present. Whole-class mindfulness exercises work well — short breathing or movement videos (many are freely available on YouTube) can be integrated into the school day without disrupting the routine.

Practise reflective listening

Give children the opportunity to speak about their worries. Name a trusted adult they can approach. When listening: acknowledge their concern, normalise worry, show you have heard them, check your understanding, and validate their feelings. Help children practise listening to each other in the same way.

Create predictable routines

Anxious children often worry about what comes next. A predictable routine and a visual timetable can greatly improve their sense of safety. Some anxious children struggle most during unstructured time — consider making specific plans for what they can do and who they can be with during break times.

Plan lessons about anxiety

Including anxiety in the curriculum helps normalise it. Even a single lesson explaining that anxiety is a universal emotion can be valuable. Exploring how anxiety feels in the body, externalising worries as "worry monsters" that children can draw and answer back to, and practising positive affirmations are all effective approaches. For younger children, picture books such as *The Colour Monster* and *The Worrysaurus* are excellent starting points.

Use a worry box

When children seem preoccupied during the school day, invite them to write their worry down and post it into a class worry box. Set aside a short, regular time each day — 15 to 30 minutes — to open the box and address worries together. This defers anxiety to a more manageable time and teaches children that worries can wait.

Build a step-by-step plan to overcome avoidance

If a child is avoiding something specific, work together on a gradual step-by-step plan. For example, a child afraid of reading aloud might start by reading to the teacher alone, then a small group, then a larger group, building towards the full class. Repeat and revise each step as needed.

Praise brave behaviour

Use age-appropriate rewards to motivate children to face their fears rather than avoid them. Verbal praise for brave behaviour — and for using good coping strategies — can be just as powerful as formal rewards. Notice and name specific positive behaviours to reinforce them.

Limit reassurance seeking

Anxious children naturally seek reassurance and may ask the same question repeatedly. While reassurance feels helpful in the moment, it maintains anxiety in the long term. Instead, ask the child what they think they could do to feel better — this builds problem-solving skills and self-efficacy.

Model mistakes and calm

Many anxious children fear getting things wrong. Intentionally making small mistakes yourself — for example, on the board — normalises error and shows that it is safe to get things wrong. Be aware of how you model your own anxiety too: only discuss children's worries with them when you are calm yourself.

Communicate with parents

Find out whether anxiety is present at home as well as school. Share coping strategies and rewards so that approaches are consistent across home and school. Let parents know if their child has had a particularly difficult day so they can plan accordingly.

Keep track and refer when needed

If a child is frequently anxious, keep a record — including whether they are eating their snacks and lunches, as hunger can worsen negative thinking. This information can be valuable when considering a referral to CAMHS.

Further resources

- Recommended reading: *Overcoming Your Child's Fears and Worries* by Cathy Creswell.
- Anna Freud Schools in Mind network: annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/schools-in-mind