



DCDSB Understanding & Supporting All Learners

What are Anxiety Disorders?

It is normal to feel stressed or anxious from time to time. This is different from a diagnosis of an Anxiety Disorder, which is characterized by frequent, excessive, and persistent worry that is very difficult to control. Anxiety disorders have a significant impact on one's social, emotional, academic, and/or behavioural functioning. It is estimated that symptoms of anxiety impact 10-20% of school-aged children. There are different types of anxiety:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder** – Intense and persistent worry that is difficult to manage, that is present most days and is excessive given the situation. A student with this type of anxiety often worries about a range of topics (e.g., the future, their parents, schoolwork, current events). Worry is typically accompanied by physical symptoms of anxiety such as stomach aches, headaches, and sleep disturbance.
- **Social Anxiety** – Intense and excessive worry in social situations (i.e., significant fear of embarrassment and concern about what others think about them). May be specific to performance situations or unfamiliar people.
- **Selective Mutism** – Significant difficulty speaking in specific situations (e.g., at school or with strangers) despite having the ability to speak in other situations (e.g., home). This often co-occurs with social anxiety.
- **Separation Anxiety** – Intense fear of being separated from caregiver, often avoid separation situations (e.g., school refusal). May be accompanied by significant concern about caregivers' location and health.
- **Panic Disorder** – Repeated episodes of intense fear of danger along with physical symptoms of anxiety, which may include rapid heart rate.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** – Occurs in response to significant trauma, characterized by re-experiencing (imagining) the trauma, avoidance of things that remind them of the trauma, numbness, and feeling agitated.

How having an Anxiety Disorder impacts one's learning and school functioning

- Frequent school absences or reluctant to attend school
- Withdrawn, often preferring to play/work alone
- Reluctance to join social activities and events
- Concern about presenting or performing in front of the class
- Perfectionism
- Difficulty completing work or speeded activities (e.g., timed drills)
- Seeking reassurance or asking a lot of 'what if' questions
- Problems with behavioural self-regulation/keeping calm
- Irritability, frustration, crying, feeling overwhelmed
- Physical complaints & symptoms (e.g., stomach ache, headache, dizziness, nausea, racing heart, shaking, difficulty breathing, sweating, chills, blushing, easily startled, etc.).

Supporting Children and Teens Who Have Anxiety

- Check and manage your own fears, anxiety, and mental health needs-make sure to take some time for your own self-care
- Check in with your child about how they feel and try not to react negatively-give them a safe place to share how they feel
- Provide distraction and try not to make most conversations about your child's anxiety
- Provide flexibility and choice though keep a routine and set expectations
- When helping with homework and studying, start with shorter, easier or preferred tasks and take breaks
- Provide clear expectations and prevent avoidance opportunities (e.g., encourage them to ask their teacher a question or participate in online social opportunities even if they are a little nervous about it)
- Encourage your child to try things that are a little bit outside of their comfort zone, but not way outside of it (e.g., if your child is nervous about asking a question that the whole class can see, encourage them to ask a question with just the teacher or just one or two other students)
- Recognize small accomplishments (e.g., tasks completed, participating in online school activities or social activities)
- Provide practice opportunities (e.g., role play conversations)
- Make the most of your child's strengths
- Frequently encourage and reward independence-try to not do everything for/with your child as this reinforces anxiety
- Set reasonable expectations and continue consequences as you would for siblings
- Review materials and books designed for parents of children how have anxiety
- Talk to your school about support options if concerns persist

Helpful Resources

For more information, you may wish to explore the following resources:

Websites:

Anxiety Canada (www.anxietycanada.com)

Child Anxiety Network (www.childanxiety.net)

Anxiety Disorder Association of Ontario (www.anxietydisordersontario.ca)

Durham Catholic District School Board Mental Health Page (<https://www.dcdsb.ca/en/parents/Mental-Health.aspx>)

Coping with Stress Related to Covid-19 (<https://www.dcdsb.ca/en/parents/resources/Coronavirus/Coping-with-Stress-of-COVID---FINAL.pdf>)

Smartphone Apps:

For a list of numerous apps to support one's mental health (which includes anxiety), please see: <https://www.dcdsb.ca/en/parents/resources/Coronavirus/Well-Being-Apps-for-Youth2020.pdf>

Stop, Breathe, Think
Mindshift

eBook:

Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child, by Katharina Manassis http://www.katharinamanassis.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/KTP_AnxiousChild_Int.pdf

Books:

What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety, by Dr. Dawn Huebner

Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents by By Ronald Rapee, Ann Wignall, Susan Spence, Heidi Lyneham, Vanessa Cobham

This information contained in this resource is not intended for diagnostic purposes. It is to be used a reference for your own understanding and to provide you with some information about the different kinds of difficulties you may encounter with your child, and about different ways you may be able to support your child at home.

