

Understanding ANXIETY in the CLASSROOM:

Spot the Signs and Provide Support

What it looks like, and why it's often mistaken for something else...

Sometimes anxiety is easy to identify – like when a child is feeling nervous before a test at school. This is normal and will pass.

When feelings of anxiety disrupt a child's ability to function, this is when it becomes a problem. Anxiety in the classroom can look like something else entirely – **an upset stomach, disruptive or angry behaviour, ADHD, distress, unwilling to engage or even an additional learning need that may not be identified**. It doesn't pass and without the right understanding and support, could lead to frequent absence, a lack of engagement in the learning process and eventually school refusal.

Early intervention is key.

There has been a rise in children struggling with anxiety since COVID.

Lots of different types of anxiety but they all have this in common...

“Anxiety tends to lock up the brain, making school hard for anxious kids.”

Ken Schuster, Child Mind Institute

Different forms of anxiety include:

- **Separation anxiety**: When children are worried about being away from their main carer. These children can have a hard time at school drop-offs and throughout the day.
- **Social anxiety**: When children are exceptionally self-conscious, making it difficult for them to participate in class and socialise with peers. Be aware of underlying bullying here too.
- **Selective mutism**: When children almost freeze in some situations and are unable to verbally communicate. For example, at school around the teacher or in whole-class situations or with some teaching staff.
- **Generalised anxiety**: When children worry about a wide variety of everyday things. Children with generalised anxiety may worry particularly about school performance and can struggle with perfectionism. May lead to them missing deadlines.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder**: When children's minds are filled with unwanted and stressful thoughts. Children with OCD try to alleviate their anxiety by performing compulsive rituals like counting or washing their hands.
- **Specific phobias**: When children have an excessive or irrational fear of particular things, like being afraid of animals or storms. Remember it is not irrational to them.

REMEMBER our role is NOT to diagnose but support and signpost to professional help if needed.

TIPS FOR RECOGNISING POSSIBLE ANXIETY IN SCHOOL

BEHAVIOURS THAT MAY BE SIGNS OF ANXIETY	WHAT COULD BE CAUSING THE ANXIETY?	WHAT CAN WE DO?
INATTENTION AND RESTLESSNESS ATTENDANCE ISSUES DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR COMPLAINING OF ILLNESS OR FREQUENT TRIPS TO THE TOILET NOT ENGAGING IN LEARNING ACTIVITIES REFUSAL TO COMPLY ABSONDING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR LOW MOOD AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOURS UNABLE TO MAKE CHOICES/DECISIONS DAYDREAMING OR GENERALLY WITHDRAWN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worry about aspects of the lesson- could be reading out loud, answering a question, the actual independent task, fear of getting it wrong, unable to ask for help, environmental factors; • A learning difficulty; • Strong attachment to parents - worry about being away from their parents. Particularly after lockdown; • Concern for their parents or other family members • Changes in family dynamics • A bereavement • Issues with friendships • Underlying health issues • Self-image issues/sexual identity • Puberty/adolescence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a supportive conversation with the child • Keep in mind the child's dignity- so not in front of the class • Say what you have noticed but with professional kindness and care • Stick to non-judgmental listening • Say you want to help them and ask them if there is anything you can do - could be something really simple • Act early rather than too late and allowing the behaviours to become a coping strategy for the child which could lead to other issues • If you don't feel they are opening up to you, ask them if there is anyone else they would prefer to talk to • Communicating positive messages non-verbally can be extremely powerful to the child with anxiety and help to minimise the panic they are feeling • Make sure all staff are fully aware of this child's anxiety and communicate what staff should do to support the child to manage their anxiety in school

OTHER STRATEGIES TO TRY:

- Different point of entry or time of entry (earlier is better);
- Have the child do a specific task/job/responsibility when they arrive to take their mind off the anxiety;
- Consider unstructured times of the day like lunchtimes. These can be stressful times for the child with anxiety. Is there capacity to organise a lunchtime club etc for some of the days? Or give the child specific responsibilities (age appropriate) to break-up the length of time;
- RAG the timetable with the child and include all parts of the day. You could use an anxiety thermometer to support with this. This will identify hotspots of the day/week when the child has heightened anxiety. Explore this with the child and identify what could help to reduce the anxiety/fear/worry;
- Include the parents and share strategies to support the child. The more involved the parents are, the more supported the child may feel. It can also give you the opportunity to share strategies that work and don't work with the young person;
- Suggest a support buddy for the child and/or a key adult that they can check in with or have timetabled times of the week to chat in private.
- Include whole class sessions on Mental Health Awareness and how everyone has good and bad mental health. This is an opportunity to create a bank of suggestions all children can benefit from. Good mental health isn't just the absence of mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. Rather, it's the presence of positive characteristics, such as being able to cope with life's challenges, handle stress, build strong relationships, and recover from setbacks.

HBSS offer a follow-on training session for schools to support children who present with anxiety in the classroom.

The session is free, will last 1 hour and can be delivered at a time which suits the school.

If you want more information, please contact Kirstie.Birmingham@halton.gov.uk or **0151 511 8985**.

