

## BCBA offers strategies to help students with anxiety persist with assignments

A student with a learning disability stops completing a worksheet because he has gotten to a question that he views as too hard and has become anxious about continuing.

Just as teachers may need strategies to help some students with disabilities manage their anxiety to initiate work while the pandemic continues, they may also need strategies to help students demonstrate persistence in finishing work and staying engaged in learning. These strategies may need to be discussed by an IEP team if a student requires them to receive FAPE, but they may also be useful on occasion when students with disabilities just need a reminder for how to keep going. Just ensure teachers know when to alert the team if a student's anxiety escalates and his learning is increasingly affected.

"Anxiety isn't conducive to producing work," said Jessica Minahan, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and consultant based in Massachusetts. Persistence strategies are about shifting the inaccurate thinking that anxiety causes so the student can keep going, she said.

Encourage educators to consistently use the words "persistence" and "persistent" in any class where a student is showing difficulty staying engaged, Minahan said. They should remind him to use strategies when necessary so he can internalize them and use them in all learning environments.

Below are some strategies to reduce anxiety and improve persistence so students stay engaged in learning:

- **Give students a sense of control.** Students may more likely persist in completing work if they can choose how they will complete it, Minahan said.

For example, a student can choose to answer only odd questions if he starts to become uncomfortable part of the way through an assignment. Or the teacher can pair the rest of the task with something pleasant, such as sitting on a dedicated cushion on the floor instead of at the desk or using a preferred writing implement.

- **Emphasize what they have accomplished.** A student may begin to become anxious about continuing with an assignment if he has answered what he believes were easier questions. At that point, he may start to shut down and disengage, Minahan said. Have the educator encourage the student to stop, take a breath, review all the problems he has completed, and circle them. "This is so the student is focused on how much he finished," she said. "It's like adults with to-do lists. We're supposed to cross items out instead of erase them, so we are tricking our thoughts. It visually tricks you to think you're productive and the work isn't so bad." Have the teacher also suggest the student look at how much he has gotten done, Minahan said. "Ask, 'How far did you get?'" she said. "If the student's got 25 percent done, he may think, 'That's not bad, I think I'll do another 10 percent.'"

- **Draw similarities to video games.** Encourage teachers to use video game analogies to engage students. Remind the students that they have persistence when playing these games, so they can also work through difficult tasks in the classroom, Minahan said.

For example, suggest a teacher ask an anxious student to divide up an assignment into levels. The student can draw a line under Problems 1 through 7 and call that Level 1. Then, the student can draw a line under Problems 8 through 15 and call that Level 2, and so on. Next, the student can draw a character from Fortnite or another video game next to that line and note each time he reaches a new level. "The student is more likely to look at it as an accomplishment to get to Level 2 and is more likely to persist when reminded of video games," she said. "Most students have a lot of experience persisting with those. It's amazing how persistent students can be with video games, but how impersistent they can be with other things."

A teacher may also want to ask a student to draw a bar at the top of her paper to mimic a progress bar you might see while a video game or movie is loading, Minahan said. The student can put an amount of boxes in the rectangle that matches the number of questions in the assignment. Each time the student finishes a question, she can fill in a box. The student may think it is half full instead of half empty as she completes her work and then, as she gets toward the end, start to think, there are *only* two more left. "I had a student ask for five more minutes because he only had one more box to fill in," she said. "Seeing only one or two open boxes left seems like it is doable."

See also:

- [A School District's Guide to Serving Students With Anxiety Under Section 504](#)
- [3 tips to address student anxiety when resources are limited](#)
- [Serving Students With Anxiety -- From Evaluation to Support Under the IDEA and Section 504](#) presented by Cynthia D. Vargas, Esq.

For more stories and guidance on this topic, access the [COVID-19 Roundup](#).

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