

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Classroom Management

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Student Anxiety and Classroom Management

The National Institutes of Health report that one in four 13- to 18-year-olds has had an anxiety disorder in his or her lifetime. This means that three or more students in the average classroom may be suffering with anxiety and the challenging behavior that can result, and overburdened teachers may be inadequately prepared to handle their complex needs, which, if left untreated, can have a serious negative impact on their learning and behavior in school. To provide help, there is a real need for educators to understand anxiety's effects on students' cognition, efficiency, and ability to perform consistently.

Further complicating the problem of understanding and treating anxiety is the fact that anxiety can smolder in the background, only surfacing when a student explodes out of fear or frustration. Furthermore, schools' traditional behavior plans are often ineffective at addressing anxiety-related behaviors because they do not acknowledge anxiety as the underlying cause. These plans often use rewards and consequences for appropriate behavior, an approach that is counterproductive for students with anxiety.

Instead, challenging behavior with anxiety as an underlying cause should be regarded as a symptom of a skill deficit, much in the same way that an inability to read well is a symptom of dyslexia. When specific skills related to self-regulation (e.g., self-calming and managing frustration), social skills (e.g., perspective taking and taking turns), self-monitoring (e.g., assessing one's emotions), executive functioning (e.g., flexibility and organization), and perspective taking are consciously and effectively taught to students with anxiety, their behavior will improve. Teaching these skills and implementing specific strategies, such as creating a reassuring [p. 785 ↓] classroom environment, monitoring and mediating anxiety throughout the school day, and addressing hot spots when anxiety is likely to increase, leads to improved behavior and more efficient, enjoyable learning.

Impact of Anxiety on Learning

Students with underaddressed anxiety can fall behind academically because they are distracted and have reduced verbal working memory (a type of short-term memory that allows someone to retain information and not have to relearn tasks for language retention, like repeating a phone number in your head while dialing). Furthermore, when students are anxious, they think less efficiently, which greatly affects their ability to learn and which can lead to significant academic deficits. Also when anxious, they often have to exert more effort to perform well because they are attempting to manage their anxiety while executing a task.

Impact of Anxiety on Behavior

Some students with anxiety show consistent and recognizable physiological signs (e.g., flushed cheeks and tense muscles). Often, however, students with anxiety show behavioral cues as the first signs that they are anxious or that their anxiety level is increasing. Recognizing, understanding, and tuning in to these behavioral cues can be useful for teachers.

Some of these behavioral signs may appear similar to the behavior of other types of students with problems (e.g., those who have low frustration tolerance or are chronically explosive)—for example, yelling, kicking, crying, leaving the classroom, or being easily frustrated. The key is to recognize when anxiety is the underlying cause and not some other cause. Fortunately, there are behavioral symptom lists that help us do this. The following is a partial list of behavioral symptoms of anxiety:

- inflexibility
- irrational, overreactive, emotionally intense responses
- sudden changes in behavior
- inconsistent behavior
- avoidance (i.e., using behavior to avoid/escape situations)
- desire for control and predictability
- perfectionism

Why Does Anxiety Lead to Inconsistent Behavior?

Based on many variables, anxiety levels fluctuate throughout the day, which makes the student's behavior erratic. Think of an unopened soda can. You cannot know if it has been shaken until you open it and the contents are released explosively. Similarly, it is difficult to see how anxious a student is at any given moment unless he or she has reached the point of exploding or shutting down.

This inconsistent presentation is unique to anxiety. Other disabilities, like a reading disability, are much more predictable. A student with dyslexia does not read a chapter flawlessly one day and then struggle over a sentence in the same book the next day. Teachers are not accustomed to thinking of disabilities as affecting students only some of the time, which makes anxiety a unique challenge.

In addition to behavior fluctuations, anxiety can also cause fluctuations in a student's academic performance owing to its effects on working memory, attention, and other abilities. Unfortunately, when teachers observe a student writing two beautiful paragraphs one day, then struggling to write a single sentence the next, they may come to the erroneous conclusion that the student is not performing up to his or her abilities because of laziness or lack of motivation.

Skill Development: The Key to Long-Term Behavioral Change

Students would behave well if they could. When a student with anxiety behaves poorly, it provides an opportunity to discover more about the student and to evaluate what is currently in place to support the student and whether the support is adequate. It allows us to think about the student in a deeper way (how she learns best, what skills need strengthening, when and where she is able to behave appropriately, and what other stressors may be present, such as family difficulty or health problems) and to reflect on her past successes as well as her challenges.

Also when a student with anxiety behaves poorly, it is often because the student has not developed necessary skills. These skills include self-regulation, social skills, flexible thinking, positive thinking, and executive function skills. Without these skills, students have great difficulty with many common classroom events, such as sharing, waiting, hearing no, or tolerating a novel activity. Teaching these skills every day to students with anxiety, with the help of tailored social-emotional curriculums, is as important as teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Self-Regulation

Many students with anxiety are unable to identify their emotions or understand that emotions start small and can escalate. Once students do understand, they can [p. 786 ↓] learn to catch themselves when they are frustrated and practice a self-regulation strategy (e.g., “I feel frustrated, so I’d better take three deep breaths”) to regulate themselves before becoming explosive or shutting down.

An emotional thermometer is a great tool for teachers to use. By labeling the child’s emotions throughout the day (“I notice you’re calm and happy right now”), it demonstrates the fluctuations that take place. Adding corresponding self-regulation strategies on the emotional thermometer is helpful for cueing the student: “I think you’re getting frustrated. What strategy are you going to use?”

Many of our students with anxiety do not know how to self-calm, so explicit instruction and practice in self-calming skills is important. A student with anxiety can benefit from practicing as often as twice a day, especially in the place where he may be taken if he becomes upset (e.g., the guidance office or a quiet corner of the classroom). This can foster automatic use of these skills when the student is in that space during an actual behavior incident.

Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring is the ability to recognize and keep track of our own behavior. If you have ever tried to quit smoking or lose weight, you might have been told to keep a log of the number of cigarettes you smoke or the amount food you consume in a day. Tracking behavior, without any other interventions, can be powerful. Just being aware of how much you are smoking or eating can change your behavior. Self-monitoring and awareness are the first steps in learning to catch ourselves when acting inappropriately and eventually stopping the behavior altogether. Self-monitoring skills can be taught and are helpful in allowing students to maintain appropriate behavior.

Accommodations—Preventive Measures

In addition to teaching students the skills they need to behave appropriately, schools can take proactive action when a student's anxiety level first begins to rise, set up the student's environment for success, and put in place accommodations, which are changes that help a student work around his or her challenges.

The best way to bypass a potential outburst or shut down is to intervene early. When a teacher observes a sudden behavior change, this is an indicator that the student's anxiety may be increasing. For instance, when a student who was calmly working starts to argue, the teacher has the opportunity for a check-in: "How's it going?" "Need a drink of water?" "Anything bothering you?" This can stop the anxiety from overwhelming the student and, most importantly, prevent the student from losing learning time because of off-task behavior.

Once a student's anxiety is already escalated, our options for intervening effectively are limited. We will have greater success if we provide the student with tools to manage the frustration or anxiety beforehand. In addition to teaching the underdeveloped skills essential for long-term behavior change, it is essential to manage common environmental triggers or school hot spots, set up the classroom with a space for self-calming (e.g., a quiet corner with pillows), form a positive relationship with the student and frontload some interventions to set the tone for the school year. Ninety percent of every behavior plan should be dedicated to prevention.

Common hot spots that can be challenging for students with anxiety include

- writing
- unstructured times
- transitions
- social demands
- novel events
- unexpected changes in routines
- exposure to an academic subject the student shows weakness in

Keeping these challenging situations in mind can be helpful when generating a plan of accommodations and supports. Students will continue to require accommodations until they develop the skills to cope and can succeed without them.

Writing

Writing can increase a student's anxiety because writing requires the use of their underdeveloped executive functioning skills, which can lead to performance anxiety over time. Teachers can help students with anxiety who try to avoid writing by using technology accommodations that remove paper-and-pencil demands and make writing easier to understand and organize.

Perfectionist tendencies can make spelling tough for students with anxiety. Providing a chart with commonly misspelled words or allowing the student to ask the teacher for the correct spelling or to use computer spell check may reduce this anxiety.

Students with anxiety about specific writing assignments can ultimately develop generalized anxiety toward all aspects of writing. When a student learns to self-monitor, he begins to recognize what he is good at and what he is struggling with, instead of making global negative comments about writing. For example, it is preferable to say, "I'm not a great speller, but I have a strategy" rather than "I hate writing" or "I'm a horrible writer." One method is for students to keep a chart of [p. 787 ↓] those aspects of writing assignments they find challenging, along with a list of strategies to use when they are stuck. (For example, when a student cannot expand on an idea, the chart tells him he can search images on the computer.) After a while, the chart may help the student realize he needs to use these strategies less than he had originally assumed and that he is not bad at *all* parts of writing, just a few. ("I'm a good writer, but I need strategies for spelling.")

Unstructured Times

We know unstructured times, such as lunch and recess, may provoke anxiety because they require social skills (e.g., deciding where to sit or whom to play with), executive

functioning skills (e.g., organizing getting lunch), and self-regulation skills (e.g., staying calm in a chaotic environment). Providing alternative lunch and/or recess settings can help a student with anxiety succeed and be more regulated during the afternoon. Teachers can facilitate a successful alternative lunchtime social interaction between the student and two peers in a small, quiet space and/or an alternative recess with a few peers in a separate location. This may allow the student to be more settled throughout the remainder of the day.

Rethinking Reinforcement

Traditional behavior plans using methods such as sticker charts, point systems, and level systems are based on rewards and consequences. For instance, “If you don’t interrupt in math class, you’ll earn five points toward your computer time” or “If you interrupt in math class, you’ll lose two minutes of recess.” Typically, the criteria for behavior are set and inflexible, based on the student’s abilities when she is calm and not taking into account her fluctuating level of anxiety or variable ability to behave and perform. This can lead to students feeling resentment at what they see as unrealistic demands. Even if she tries, the student may be unable to meet the criteria when she is anxious. In addition, these behavior plans usually do not emphasize teaching explicit skills or proactive anxiety management.

Shift in Emphasis

For students with anxiety, it may still be helpful to use rewards and reinforcements, such as receiving points or tokens. However, rather than being bestowed for good behavior, they should be given for practicing social or self-regulation skills or for using a strategy in a difficult, anxious moment. This reinforces the practice and application of the underdeveloped skills the student is working on.

Conclusion

Traditional behavior programs and plans often do not meet the needs of students with anxiety and may even exacerbate the problem—because they do not address the underlying anxiety. Understanding the role anxiety plays in a student’s behavior is crucial. An effective behavior plan needs to avoid reward/punishment-based consequences. Instead it should focus on teaching the student with anxiety to cope with anxiety and to use alternative responses to anxiety while strengthening underdeveloped skills. Including preventive strategies and accommodations as part of an overall anxiety management approach to behavior will help students to thrive.

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See also Behavior Disorders; Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM); Medication for Emotional and Behavioral Problems; Self-Regulated Learning; Social and Emotional Learning; Stress

Further Readings

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Student Interest, Stimulating and Maintaining

When a child is curious and interested in something, he willingly pays attention to it. Depending on age and experiences, this interest can range from simple objects to complex concepts. The greater a child's interest in an idea, object, or concept, the more motivated the child is to communicate and learn more about it. Effective teachers develop strategies and use curricula to engage and maintain children's interests. They use this sustained interest as a platform for building and supporting children's learning and development. The main purpose of this entry is to describe strategies and curricular approaches that may stimulate and maintain children's interest.

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Considering Children's Development

Effective teachers are aware of the typical paths of child development and the challenges that occur in children's development at various locations along that path. This awareness allows them to provide learning experiences that embrace the developmental challenges that are typically interesting to children at the ages of the children in the class. For example, 18-month-old children are typically interested in dropping objects into a container and then dumping them out. Knowing this, teachers who has an 18-month-old in their class would then provide objects and containers for that purpose. They would maintain the child's interest by varying the type and quantity of objects and providing a variety of containers. Yet, this activity would likely be boring to typically developing 4-year-olds, who are developing symbolic thought. Effective teachers of 4-year-olds would recognize that their students would likely be interested in taking on roles during pretend play. They would provide props that her students might use to support their play.