

Addressing Anxiety and Mental Health with Children

Mount Vernon Community School PTA Meeting

January 14, 2020

Objectives

- Recognize common signs of anxiety.
- Understand what kids might worry about and kinds of situations that may cause children to feel anxious.
- Become knowledgeable of strategies that can be used to help children feel less anxious.
- Practice relaxation/calming strategies.
- Learn how to talk with children about mental health.

Children and Anxiety

- Children will likely struggle with feelings of anxiety at some point during their lives.
- Certain situations (e.g., tests, grades, performances, sporting events, parental stress, sickness, trying something new, etc.) might cause children to feel a little worried or anxious.



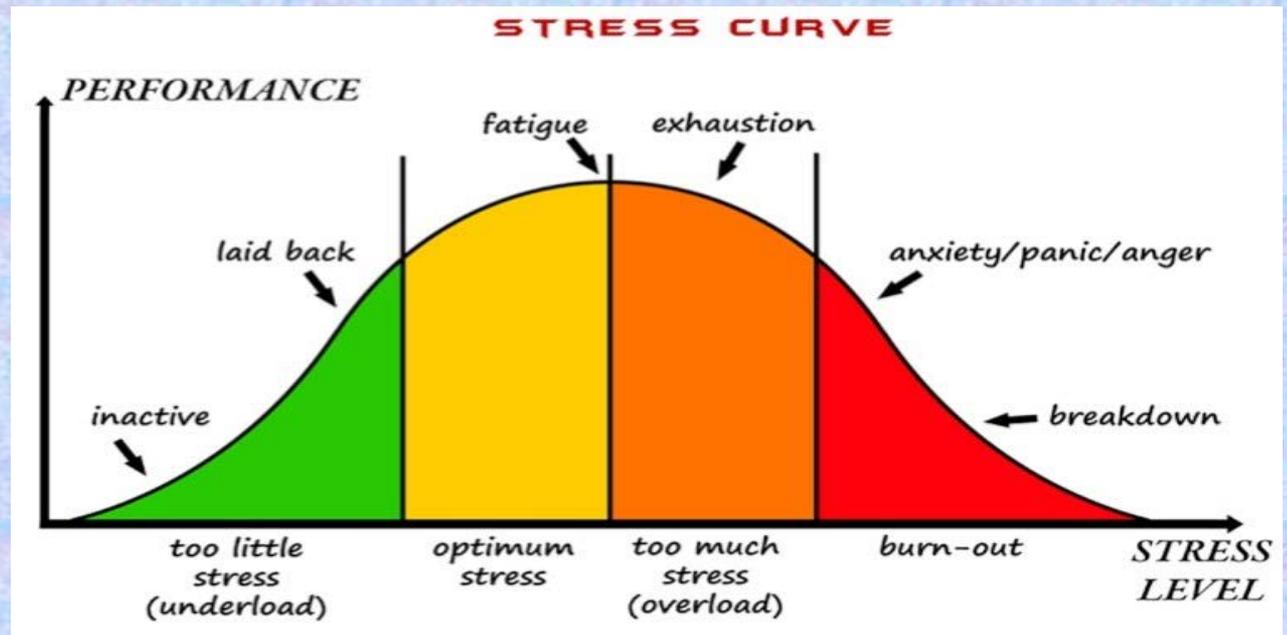
Managing Anxiety

- Helping students to manage their anxieties/worries will likely help them to feel:
 - safe in taking risks
 - supported
 - courageous and empowered



Children & Anxiety

- Anxiety – a normal, adaptive reaction
 - It creates a level of arousal/alertness to danger
- Primary Characteristic – Worry
 - Worry is fear that future events will have negative outcomes



What do kids have to worry about?

- Family stressors
- Media exposure
- Weather/Environmental Dangers
- Peer relationships
- School problems
- Digital world
- Performance
- Death/dying



Anxiety and the Brain

- Amygdala
 - The feeling/emotional part of the brain
 - Emotional alarm system
 - Fight, run, or freeze
- Prefrontal cortex
 - Responsible part of the brain
 - The brakes of the brain
 - Ability to name feeling, consider consequences, make rational decisions
- Both are important and must work together

Children struggling with anxiety are much more likely to:

– See **minor events** as **potentially threatening**

- For example: presenting in front of the class is slightly anxiety-producing, but for a student with anxiety, this child is more likely to believe that his/her performance will be a “complete disaster”
- “All or Nothing” Thinking, other cognitive distortions

– They may engage in **avoidance** behaviors

- Withdrawn in the classroom
- Not initiate interactions
- May select easy over difficult tasks
- May avoid situations where they anticipate increased risk for failure

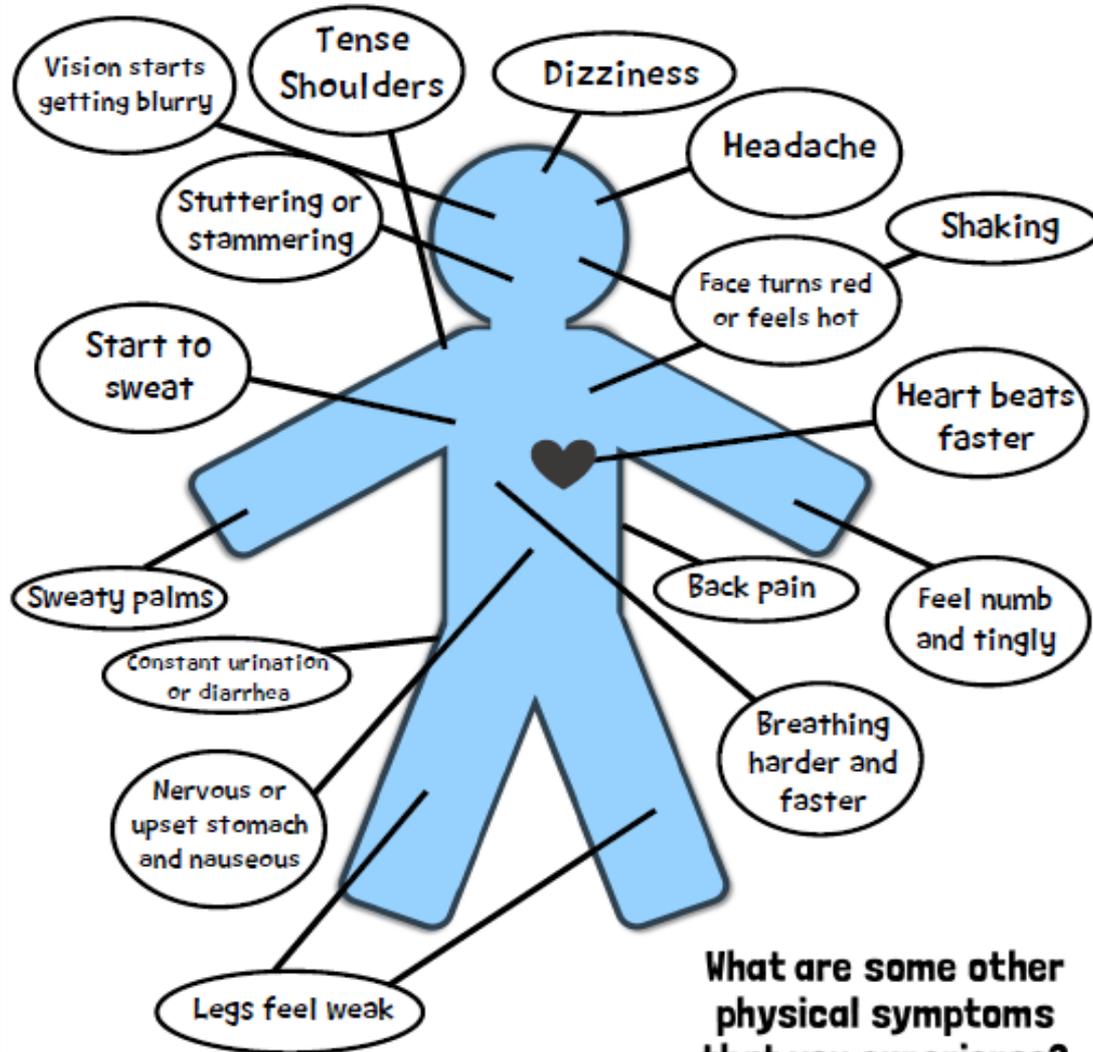
Socially

- May feel uncomfortable with **new** situations
- May worry about being evaluated/judged socially
- May fear others will view them negatively
- Their worry may be **out of proportion** to the situation at hand.



ANXIETY AND MY BODY

Color in the reactions that happen to your body when you start getting anxious.



What are some other physical symptoms that you experience?



Signs of Anxiety

Signs of Anxiety

Thinking/Learning	Behavior	Physical
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Difficulty concentrating- Memory problems- Attention problems- Problem-solving difficulties- Worry	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Restlessness- Fidgeting- Task avoidance- Rapid speech- Irritability- Withdrawal- Perfectionism- Lack of participation- Failing to complete tasks- Seeking out easy tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Stomach discomfort- Rapid heart rate- Flushing of the skin- Perspiration- Headaches- Muscle tension- Sleeping problems- Nausea

Helping Children to Manage Anxiety

- Establish **predictable** routines
- Set **clear** and **reasonable expectations**
- **Break down tasks** into manageable chunks
- Be patient and prepared to **listen**
- **Avoid** being overly critical, disparaging, impatient, or cynical
- Maintain **realistic, attainable goals and expectations** for your child

Helping your Child Cope

- Do NOT communicate that perfection is expected or acceptable
- Accept that **mistakes are a normal** part of growing up and that no one is expected to do everything equally well
- Praise and reinforce **Effort**, even if success is less than expected
- **Practice** and rehearse upcoming events

Helping your Child to Manage Anxiety

- Simple Strategies to Teach Your Child:
 - **Organizing** their materials and time
 - Developing small **scripts** of what to do and say to themselves when anxiety increases (e.g., mantras, next steps)
 - Learn how to relax under stressful conditions by engaging in stress-reduction strategies
 - Practice during times you are calm/rational

Strategies

- **Deep Breathing** = take full deep breaths (in for the count of 4, hold for the count of 4, out for the count of 6)
- **Art** = art can bring immediate relief and distract from negative emotions
- **Music** = play calming classical music for your child to listen to as they sit or lie down with their eyes closed
- **Guided Imagery** = ask child to close eyes, stay still, direct child to: imagine lying down and looking up at the clouds, have child imagine the different shapes of the clouds, ask child to imagine a ladder from him/her up to the clouds, and have the child imagine climbing the ladder and feeling more relaxed with each step

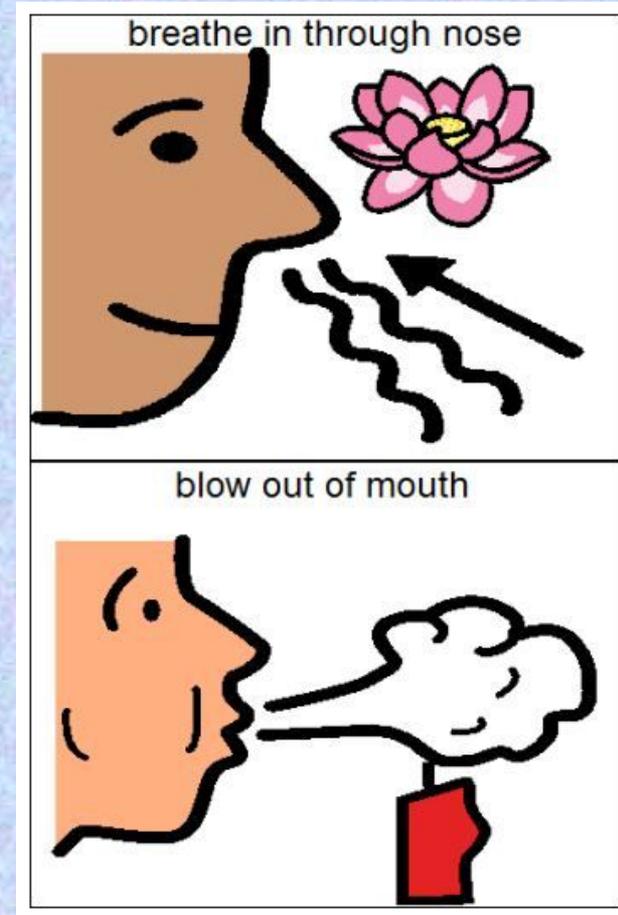
Additional Relaxation Techniques

- **Manipulatives** = provide child with “toys” like putty, stress balls, fidget toys, sequin sensory objects
- **Journaling** = try encouraging your child to write about his/her feelings or keep a **gratitude journal**
- **Stretching** = doing child’s pose from yoga, other stretches, touch toes, reach up
- **Do a Puzzle**



Relaxation Techniques that can be done ANYWHERE

- **Practice Positive Self-Talk** = have your child practice telling him/herself what he/she is proud of, what he/she is good at, what he/she likes about themselves
- **“Hand Breathing”** = breathe in and out as you trace your hand; breathe in through the nose for 4 seconds as you trace up your finger, hold at the top of the finger for 4 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds as you trace your finger down; continue for all 5 fingers
 - “Smell the Flower, blow out the candle” breathing
- **Pretzel** = put your arms straight out, palms down, cross your arms and fingers in front of you, then fold them under and squeeze
- **Counting** = slowly count down from 10 on your fingers, then do a deep breath and relax shoulders
- **Come up with a Mantra**: for example, “I am smart, I am strong, I can do it!” or “I can’t control what other people say/do, but I can control what I say/do.” “I’ll try my best, I’ll be okay.”



More Coping Strategies!

- Access to a stuffed animal
- A worry jar or journal
- A body scan to progressively relax the muscles
- Practice gratitude
- **What you (the parent/guardian) can do:**
 - **Model** self-confidence and calmness
 - Point out times your child **overcame** difficulties before
 - Talk about when you felt worried and **how you overcame** a difficulty
 - Talk about a time when you **made a mistake**, but explain **what you learned** as a result of making the mistake

Helping your Child Manage Anxiety

- Do NOT treat feelings, questions, and statements about feeling anxious as silly or unimportant
 - **Empower** your child to feel **comfortable** discussing his/her feelings and help them understand **why** they may be feeling that way
 - Do NOT criticize your child for not being able to respond to rational approaches
- **Seek help if your child feels excessively anxious or the anxiety is interfering with daily activities**

Explaining Mental Health to Children

DO:

- Allow for questions
- Answer questions honestly and directly
- When Your Brain Hurts, different than a headache
- Feelings are so BIG that it is hard to make good, safe decisions
- Sometimes requires working with people that can help (psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, counselor)

AVOID:

- Saying anything about being “crazy” or other language that can be stigmatising to people with mental health conditions
- Over Explanations

How to Talk to Your Kids About Their Mental Health

- **Model positive sharing about emotions and challenges**
 - Show your child it is okay to acknowledge feelings by talking about your own
- **Ask questions even when nothing appears to be wrong**
 - Opt for open-ended inquiries about specific times/situations
 - “What was your favorite part of the day?,” “What was difficult for you today?,” “What would you like me to know about today?”
- **Neutralize your tone**
 - Speak in a calm and even tone free of assumptions and worry
- **Offer a bit about your day first**
 - Share something short and interesting about your day, can be entertaining or reveal vulnerability

How to Talk to Your Kids About Their Mental Health

- **Know the warning signs**

Look out for the following behavioral changes, which could be warning signs of a mental health issue:

- Restlessness and agitation
- Acting out
- Lack of enthusiasm, energy or motivation
- Forgetfulness and lack of concentration
- Withdrawing from friends and activities
- Dropping grades or frequent school absences
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Frequent headaches and body aches
- Substance abuse
- Self-harm

How to Talk to Your Kids About Their Mental Health

- **Don't shrug off seemingly minor problems**
 - It is important to take them seriously and validate their discomfort by acknowledging it
- **Resist the urge to fix it**
 - Parents often want to rush into problem solving which can be invalidating.
 - kids are more committed to a solution if they come up with it themselves
- **Discussing death/suicide**
 - Bring it up naturally
 - Try to contain your emotional reaction
 - Don't worry about putting ideas in their head
 - Trust your instincts

Qualified Mental Health Professionals at Mount Vernon

- School Psychologist – Andrew Intagliata
- School Psychology Intern – Brittany Wilkerson
- School Social Worker – Michelle Shimizu
- Counselors
 - Yolanda Smith
 - 3rd-5th grade
 - Zaida Morales
 - K-2nd grade

References

- Allen, J.S. & Klein, R.J. (1996). *Ready... Set... Relax: A Research Based Program of Relaxation, Learning, and Self-Esteem for Children*. Watertown, WI: Inner Coaching.
- Huberty, T. J. (2010). Anxiety and anxiety disorders in children: Information for parents. *National Association of School Psychologists*.
<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/mental-health/mental-health-disorders/anxiety-and-anxiety-disorders-in-children-information-for-parents>
- [https://www.mylemarks.com/store/p317/Anxiety and My Body.html](https://www.mylemarks.com/store/p317/Anxiety%20and%20My%20Body.html)
- <https://www.psycom.net/kids-coping-skills-anxiety>
- Why You Should Talk to Kids About Suicide by Children's Hospital of Colorado
<https://www.childrenscolorado.org/conditions-and-advice/parenting/parenting-articles/suicide-prevention-tips/>

Questions/Comments?

