

**Meeting Learning Challenges: Working with the Child Who Has Anxiety Disorders**

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by Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

**Working With Children Who Have Anxiety Disorders**

Exploring ways to help the anxious child feel more comfortable in the classroom

I am a teacher of a 3 1/2-year-old boy who is having a lot of trouble making routine classroom transitions. Even though it is still early in the year, he gets unusually upset when a stranger comes into the room or if there's a new assistant or graduate student. He seems to have so many fears. At my suggestion, the family recently took him to a clinician, who reported that the child suffers from an anxiety disorder. What can I do to minimize this child's discomfort and help him relax in school?

First, a cautionary word: We should be careful to avoid labeling children with the term anxiety disorder and instead simply recognize that some children have more anxiety than others. They tend to be very sensitive to sights, sounds, touch, or even movement or high places. Such a child is likely to experience anxiety when hearing a cat's meow, which to him may sound like a lion's roar, or when another child just accidentally brushes up against him. He may experience a teacher's slight look of annoyance as a major attack. So, this very sensitive child tends to intensify or magnify what for other children are routine experiences and therefore feels unusually anxious.

It's understandable that he will have a hard time changing activities, because leaving the familiar for the unfamiliar can also be a little scary. And anything that would be a little adventuresome may be overwhelming.

An anxious child faces many challenges at once, and sometimes other factors may intensify the anxiety. The child may be advanced verbally, but weaker in visual-spatial thinking, so managing big spaces like a classroom can be challenging. It's scary, too, if he doesn't quite see how all the sections of a classroom fit together to create a much-needed sense of security.

Stress can also intensify the anxiety. And it makes matters worse if the child has any problems with fine- or gross-motor skills or the ability to sequence and problem solve.

**What You Can Do**

Here are a few things you can do in the classroom to help:

- Make calming, supportive gestures. At the same time, don't fall into the trap of being overprotective, because this child needs to learn self-sufficiency and assertiveness. Remember, he has a hard time flexing his muscles and being assertive because he's so scared of new things.

- Provide soothing and nurturing care, while at the same time encouraging self-sufficiency and assertiveness. For example, if he is beginning to have a mild tantrum because he doesn't want to transition from one activity to the next, say, in a very soothing tone, "Boy, I can tell you don't want to go from drawing to playing with blocks. What should we do? Everyone else is moving along. When do you think you'll be ready?" In a kind voice, negotiate with him while at the same time communicating that he needs to be ready in a minute or two and that you're going to help him move from one place to the other. The idea is to give him a little more time and prevent power struggles.

- Look for opportunities for him to be a helper in order to encourage his independence and assertiveness. Be sure to do this when he's calm and collected and able to gain some self-esteem from being an independent leader.

- Offer physical experiences that will gradually allow him to adapt to the sensory world around him. Allow him to adjust the volume of music in the classroom so that he can get used to the sound on his own terms. Similarly, introducing activities that require physical contact with other children can be a nice way of allowing him to adapt at his own pace; he should be in charge of the contact, becoming familiar with these sensations very gradually.

- Engage him in games in which he has to find things, so that he can learn to negotiate his way around a large space. And if he has motor problems that cause clumsiness with sports or hinder him from drawing or making his letters, create games that allow him to practice those skills.

Finally, the most important thing the teacher can do for the anxious child is to create a very soothing, reassuring environment. This is done best through the tone of the relationship with the child. So keep your voice calm, but also warm and connected.

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