

Managing Academic Anxiety

Middle school

In any given school year, children may experience feelings of anxiety from academic pressure, testing or being called on in class. While some anxiety can be helpful and motivating, anxiety can become problematic when it interferes with everyday functioning.



Anxiety is a normal feeling of nervousness, worry or uneasiness that everyone experiences throughout their lives.

Academic anxiety is a specific type of worry associated with school-related responsibilities and pressures.

Talking about academic anxiety

Signs of academic anxiety

While anxiety can look different in every child, here are some general signs to watch out for:

- Complaining of frequent headaches, stomachaches or other physical pain with no known medical cause.
- Avoiding school or certain classes (e.g., refusing to get dressed or trying to miss the bus).
- Worrying about school and no longer making time for activities they used to enjoy, including social interactions.
- Showing changes in sleep or eating habits.
- Showing changes in mood, such as appearing to be "on edge," irritable or tearful.
- Acting out in class (e.g., being the class clown, getting in fights or talking back).
- Having an "I don't care" attitude about anything related to school.
- Sweating, shaking or fast breathing when thinking or talking about school.

Communication Tip	Instead of saying ...	Try saying ...
Ask open-ended questions and allow them to share their honest feelings.	"Have you studied enough? Are you worried you're going to fail?"	"How are you feeling about that class?"
Keep your cool. Try not to pass along any of your own anxiety.	"Tests always made me feel uneasy. I hope you don't get overwhelmed and forget everything you've studied."	"I know you have been studying so hard and will do your best."
Help them learn to manage their feelings, not avoid them.	"I get it. You're nervous to present in front of your class. Let's ask your teacher if you can do something else."	"It's normal to feel nervous. How about you practice presenting it in front of me so that you feel more prepared tomorrow?"

Maintaining healthy routines

Consistent routines help children know what to expect, allowing them to feel more secure, calm and focused.

- **Nutrition:** Children need to fuel their bodies to fuel their minds. Drinking water and eating balanced meals and snacks help kids pay better attention in school.
- **Sleep:** It's much easier to retain and recall information after a good night's sleep. Keep digital screens out of the bedroom, and turn them off an hour before bed to get better-quality rest.
- **Balance:** Encourage children to explore other interests and hobbies so that school is not their only focus.
- **Play:** Kids need unstructured time to play, unwind, be creative and relax. Taking breaks and being active can improve a child's ability to focus and do well in school.

Studying smarter

Knowing how to properly study, and be organized, can help reduce anxiety.

- Break big assignments up into smaller, more manageable pieces.
- Find a quiet space and remove distractions (such as the TV, phone, etc.).
- Use a planner to help with time-management.

Practicing relaxation strategies

It's difficult for anyone to learn something new when they are anxious, angry or distracted, so try to introduce new relaxation (or coping) strategies when everyone is calm. A skill that works one day might not work the next, so encourage your child to try different strategies to help build a coping skills toolbox.

Grounding

Grounding is a coping skill that helps us focus on the present moment—rather than our worries—to help calm our bodies and minds.

How to practice grounding:

- Take several slow, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Use your 5 senses to notice the following:



5 things you can **see**.



4 things you can **touch**.



3 things you can **hear**.



2 things you can **smell**.



1 thing you can **taste**.



If you are concerned your child may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety that go beyond what is normal and tolerable, talk to your child's pediatrician or school counselor about additional support that may be available.