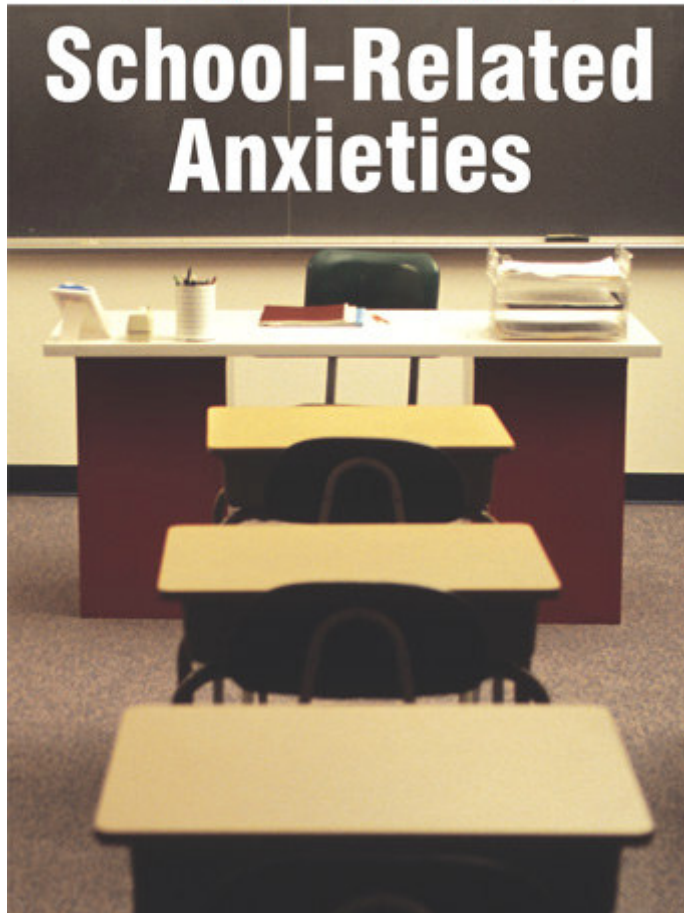


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**Recognizing
Your Child's**

**School-Related
Anxieties**



August 2005

by Alison Amoroso

Children don't usually offer up their worst fears to us – we have to play detective a bit. Sometimes a teacher tells us there's a problem, or we'll overhear our son or daughter talking to friends. Often there are no clues. Anxieties of some sort plague virtually all of us, and children are no different.

In fact, anxieties can be magnified for school-age children because they are in the same situation day in and day out. A random situation that we encounter as an adult can be brushed off or avoided, but a child has to face the same classmates and teachers each day.

Experts have some advice on ways you can help your child cope with common anxieties so he starts the new school year with confidence.

Fear of not being liked/accepted

“Kids are very concerned about being liked by their peers,” explains Dr. Nancy McGarrah, president of Cliff Valley Psychologists in Atlanta, “and the difficulties with acceptance are happening with younger and younger kids, especially for girls. I had a first grader who was not ‘allowed’ to sit with her friends at lunch because she was having a ‘bad hair day.’” Sad but true.

“Parents should reassure their children that they are special and important just the way they are,” states Dr. Kelli McCormick Bynum, a psychologist with a private practice who also educates students and parents in metro schools through the Eating Disorders Information Network. “Remind your children that they do not have to be liked by everyone, conform to society standards, or conform to the standards of so-called popular kids. Kids need to learn that those standards are often unrealistic and not worth wasting their time on.”

For children having particular difficulty, McGarrah recommends group therapy with similar-aged kids to work on social skills. She warns, “Parents should not ignore this problem in the hope that it will go away.”

Fear of being fat or ugly

A similar fear related to being accepted is that children worry about their looks and body image. In some respects, all children growing and developing worry, but it is more difficult for some. “Many children start having distorted body images and are on diets way too soon, as young as elementary school,” McGarrah finds. Dr. Craig Kerley, a former school psychologist in Gwinnett and Henry public schools and now in private practice, says that from about fourth grade on, “kids fear being fat. In fact, I’ve never had a normal weight female client in eighth through 10th grade who thought that her weight was fine.” To help, tell your children repeatedly that they have beautiful bodies that can do amazing things. Provide your children with three healthy meals a day and sit together to eat whenever possible. Refrain from all looks-based comments. McGarrah suggests that parents model healthy eating and exercising without emphasizing size or dieting.

“In middle school, children can begin to feel that they’re ugly, as this is a time children worry that everyone is looking at them,” explains Kerley. “Schoolmates tend to pick on a specific component of a child’s looks. Boys in particular get teased a lot.” Repeated teasing can be bullying, and McGarrah encourages parents to contact the teacher or administrator if it looks like the line is being crossed.

McCormick Bynum recommends counseling your children at a very early not to engage in weight-related or appearance-based teasing. She explains that allowing your child to tease will only make him less sensitive to the feelings of others and possibly become more self-conscious himself. Kerley adds that self-consciousness is normal in this age group and the culture of middle school. Parents should “really pay attention to their middle school child,” he says, “as this is when he usually chooses between two paths for his development, one negative and one positive.” Kerley suggests preparing your child for negative social interaction by role-playing, reviewing any negative situations he experiences during the day, and brainstorming about how to handle them for the future.

Fear of Failure

With the advent of tests used to promote children in school, fear of failure, particularly fearing tests, is common now in elementary school. “Even kids with no chance of failing spend part of the year worrying,” says Kerley, who sees children pulling out their hair and throwing up with anxiety. Fear of failure can manifest in different scenarios. Some children won’t try out for a sport or club. He sees very bright children just decide not to do a project rather than risk failure. “Anxiety gets in the way of your child doing well,” explains Kerley. “It impairs memory and problem-solving ability.” He emphasizes that parents should reassure their child that he is not letting them down no matter how he performs, and that the teacher is teaching him what he needs to know to succeed.



McCormick Bynum warns: “Parents often put too much pressure on their children to do well or to pass entrance exams for particular schools. Help your children plan and prepare, not wait until the last minute, and make sure your kids are getting plenty of sleep. Parents should keep their fears to themselves.”

Performance Anxiety

You probably know that fear of public speaking is the No. 1 phobia in the U.S. So why should your children feel any differently? Reading out loud in class or being called on can be devastating for a child with performance anxiety. “For some children the fear is the symptom of a learning disability or other problem,” explains McGarrah, “and the school psychologist should be consulted.” On the other hand, “a majority of the

time children referred to me for learning disabilities really have performance anxiety,” explains Kerley. “Once the child eases into facing his fear and is successful, the fear decreases.” McCormick Bynum suggests role-playing, reading aloud and answering questions at home with an audience; for school, Kerley recommends that teachers be asked to give a child plenty of warning of what he will be asked to read or answer aloud. “Do not force children to face their fear,” he says, “but help them practice over time.”

Stranger Anxiety

Performance anxiety can be a form of fear of social interaction, as is stranger anxiety. This happens in young children and will often manifest as “selective mutism” in pre-school and kindergarten. Kerley explains that parents and siblings will begin to talk for the children, making it more difficult for the child to overcome his fear. “Do not let people communicate for the child,” recommends Kerley, and “reward him for even the most basic attempt at communicating.” He also suggests helping the child practice by using a tape recorder.

Fears can turn into full-blown anxiety disorders if a child is not able to develop coping methods. In addition, anxiety and depression go hand in hand and can be disabling. “Anxiety is based in hope,” Kerley explains. “When a child gives up and you hear hopelessness, such as, ‘No one likes me,’ the feeling of sadness is a sign of depression and not just anxiety. In this case, you should seek professional help.” All children need their parent’s reassurance as they develop. “Talk to them about their feelings,” recommends Kerley. “Don’t ever try to find evidence that their fear or feeling isn’t true, even if you believe it isn’t logical. Look behind their words to their feelings and talk about those.”