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- 2011 – 2012 FSSTT Lecture Series

THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY ON SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

In a world affected by financial, political and environmental warnings, the current “age of threats” has heightened anxiety in children. Educators describe students who seek inordinate amounts of re-assurance in order to proceed through typical developmental tasks, sometimes as basic as attending school. Parents are often so dedicated to helping with the academic tasks their children need to negotiate independently that they can negate the benefits their children may gain from completing these tasks on their own. Conversely, these parents feel helpless if their less-than-confident child struggles to leave their home to get to school. Research reports that anxiety cripples about 6-10% of school-aged children. How do schools establish environments to help these young anxious students?

When does worry become anxiety?

It is not uncommon for children and adults to worry. In fact, worry can be adaptive as it makes us cautious when faced with challenges, protects us from risky situations and energizes us to master new skills. An announced test can cause worry in the most conscientious of students, motivating them to study before the test day. A track meet can provide the impetus of a more sustained practice schedule in student athletes. However, when worry causes a student to avoid school in order not to take the test, or attend the track meet, further impacting other routines in the child's life and accompanied by physical complaints (e.g. stomach ache, headaches), anxiety is identified.

How does anxiety affect children?

Anxiety affects how people think about a situation, their behaviour, as well as their physical reaction. Thoughts are often negative in the way they explain life's event – e.g. “I never get a chance” as opposed to “Everyone gets a turn.”

People develop avoidant behaviour as a means of protecting themselves from becoming anxious. Refusing to walk to school to avoid a dog that scares you may generalize to refusing to walk to a store or a friend's house.

Anxiety causes the body to react. Goldstein, Hagar and Brooks (2002) describe breathing patterns that may

become more shallow and/or more rapid, muscle tension and a more rapid heartbeat.

Types of anxiety in children

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD): Often these children have multiple worries and fears. The children and teenagers usually strive to be perfect and worry about what other people think of them.

Social Phobia: These students have trouble in social situations and may avoid school or recreational activities in order to avoid interactions with others. They are often very shy, and self conscious, overly sensitive to criticism, embarrass easily and have trouble being assertive.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD): OCD is characterized by obsessions (frequent, uncontrollable thoughts, e.g., fear of germs), coupled with compulsions (routines or rituals taking place to keep the obsessions away, e.g., washing hands). The obsessions and compulsions cause the young person so much anxiety that it takes up much of their day to avoid the consequence of not doing them (e.g. getting sick).

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): A fairly rare situation where a single traumatic event or series of repeated traumatic events involve anxiety symptoms. These symptoms involve jumpiness, hyper-vigilance, nightmares, and flashbacks or vivid memories of the event.

Separation Anxiety: Separation anxiety occurs in children under 18 who have excessive worry about separating from a caregiver, who they fear will be hurt in their absence. They are afraid they will be kidnapped or lost. The child may refuse to go to school or even to sleep without the caregiver being beside them. Separation anxiety is more common with young children.

Panic: A physical or emotional reaction to an anxiety provoking object or situation is generally described as a panic attack. Heart-racing, sweating, trembling, and hyperventilation may be experienced as children describe the fear they will die, become immobilized, or lose control.

What causes anxiety in children?

Researchers conclude there are multiple and complex causes of anxiety disorders. Children are more vulnerable

to developing anxiety if they have a parent with anxiety or depression. In some families, worry is more prevalent than in others, therefore, some children are exposed to this view of the world more regularly than other children. Many parents will try to help relieve the anxious reactions of their children and this avoidance of these challenges may maintain the panicked behaviour of the child rather than reinforce an adaptive way to help the child deal with it. Finally, more recent knowledge of the brain has indicated that there are chemical differences in the neurobiology of children who are anxious.

How can school personnel help anxious children?

- For children who are in treatment, collaboration between the treating professionals and school personnel is very important:
- A support person at school to help with anxiety management strategies and for support.
 - Encourage the child to stay at school but provide flexibility if possible.
 - School absences should be avoided as much as possible in children with anxiety.
- Alternate location for tests or additional time for children who have exam anxiety.
- Decrease requirements for oral presentations for children with social phobia, but...
 - Progressively increase requirements with support from school personnel.
- Help children cope with stomach aches and headaches.
 - Help make the link between their thoughts, feelings and physical sensations.
- Relaxation techniques.
- Help child develop 'coping statements'- things they can say to themselves when they are afraid or feel anxious.
 - "It's just my fear talking. I can do this."
 - "These feelings won't last long. They aren't dangerous."
- When there is a fear situation, help the child face the fear in small steps, e.g., fear of oral presentation.

(Reference: Dr. Chandra Magill, February 2011 lecture)

In summary

Worry is common and may help children adapt to new changes and be vigilant about the challenges ahead. When worry overwhelms children and causes them to avoid interactions with their families, friends and schools, it may be an anxiety disorder and parents can seek help from mental health professionals in schools, paediatricians, CSSS workers and hospitals. Anxiety can be treated with effective treatment therapy such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) or CBT with medication. Follow up is recommended.

Children with anxiety are often good students and good friends. Ultimately, helping them develop coping strategies to deal with their anxiety will aid them in every aspect of their lives.

Rita McDonough

References:

- Bourne, E. (2010). *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc.
- Brooks, R., & Goldstein, S. (2001). *Raising Resilient Children*. New York, NY: Contemporary Books/McGraw Hill
- Goldstein, S., Hagar, K., & Brooks, R. (2002). *Seven Steps to Help Your Child Worry Less*. Plantation, FL: Specialty Press Inc.
- Wilson, R. (1996). *Don't Panic: Taking control of anxiety attacks*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- Wilson R. (2003). *Facing Panic: Self-help for people with panic attacks*. Silver Spring, MD: Anxiety Association of America

Websites:

- www.adaa.org – Anxiety Disorders Association of America
- www.caringforkids.cps.ca – Canadian Pediatric Society
- www.worrywisekids.org

Neither comprehension nor learning can take place in an atmosphere of anxiety.

- Rose Kennedy

FSST LECTURE SERIES FOR 2011 – 2012 in conjunction with The Centre Of Excellence For Mental Health

The lectures are held in the board room at the Lester B. Pearson School Board, 1925 Brookdale Avenue, Dorval, from 7 – 9 p.m. Everyone is welcome to register. The cost for the entire series is \$25. For more information, please contact Ivan Smith (ismith@lbpsb.qc.ca) or Kathy Wright (kwright@lbpsb.qc.ca).

- **Wednesday, October 19, 2011**
Maureen Baron, MA, PhD Candidate
"Cyber-bullies"
- **Wednesday, November 16, 2011**
Mounir Samy, MD, Psychiatrist
"The New Adolescent"
- **Wednesday, January 18, 2012**
Dawn Cruchet, BN, MEd, CT
"What Happens When Someone Dies? Helping Children and Teens Deal with Death"
- **Wednesday, February 15, 2012**
Chandra Magill, MD, FRPC, Psychiatrist
"Anxiety: Tools for Helping Children and Their Parents"
- **Wednesday, March 14, 2012**
Victoria Talwar, PhD, Associate Professor – McGill University
"Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire!"

If you have comments or ideas for future topics, please contact Maureen Hunt 514-422-3000, ext. 4312, or by email: mhunt@lbpsb.qc.ca.