



Supporting primary school children with anxiety

Tuesday, 24 November 2015

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respects to Elders past, present and future, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Tonight's panel



**Dr. Michaela
Baulderstone**
General Practitioner



Dr. Marilyn Campbell
*Professor at QUT, Registered
Teacher and Psychologist*



Facilitator:
Dr. Lyn O'Grady
*National Project Manager,
KidsMatter*

Ground Rules

To help ensure everyone has the opportunity to gain the most from the live webinar, we ask that all participants consider the following ground rules:

- Be respectful of other participants and panellists. Behave as if this were a face-to-face activity.
- Be mindful of taking care of yourself during the session. Sometimes hearing about mental health difficulties can be triggering for us.
- Post your comments and questions for panellists in the General Chat box. For help with technical issues, post in the Technical Help chat box. Be mindful that comments posted in the chat boxes can be seen by all participants and panellists. Please keep all comments on topic.
- If you would like to hide the chat, click the small down-arrow at the top of the chatbox.
- Your feedback is important. Please complete the short exit survey which will appear as a pop up when you exit the webinar.

Learning Outcomes

Through an inter-disciplinary panel discussion about James and Charlie, at the completion of the webinar participants will:

- be better equipped to recognise the signs of anxiety in primary school aged children
- have a better understanding of the causes of anxiety and its potential impact on primary school children's mental health and wellbeing
- be better equipped to support and respond to the needs of primary school aged children with anxiety, including working collaboratively with primary schools, health and community professionals

NB: The case study is designed to be open ended in order to raise questions, provoke thought and generate discussion.

Fearful and anxious behaviour is common in childhood

Most children learn to cope with a range of normal fears and worries.

- How do we know when we should be concerned?
- What might anxiety look like in a school setting?
- What might lead to children being anxious?
- What are the types of anxiety disorders we see in primary school aged children?
- Who can help?

We might become concerned when:

- Children feel anxious more than other children of their age and level
- Anxiety stops them participating in activities at school or socially
- Anxiety interferes with their ability to do things that other children their age do easily
- The fears and worries seem out of proportion to the issues in their life.

When children become anxious more easily, more often and more intensely than other children, they may be diagnosed with an Anxiety Disorder.

Anxiety Disorders in children of primary school age include phobias, generalised anxiety disorder and separation anxiety.

What do we know about anxiety in childhood?

Anxiety Disorders:

- Social phobia
- Separation anxiety disorder
- Generalised anxiety disorder
- Obsessive compulsive disorder

Anxiety disorders affect 6.9% of children (4 – 11 years) with a mental health disorder

- More likely in boys (7.6%) than girls (6.1%)

Other common mental health disorders:

1. ADHD (8.2%)
2. Conduct Disorder 2.0%
3. Major depressive disorder 1.1%

What might anxiety look like at school?



- Wanting things to be perfect
- Reluctance to ask for help
- Difficulty joining in social activities with peers
- Stomach pains and headaches
- Fearful of test situations or performing in front of others
- Upset when leaving parents

How do anxiety disorders develop?

- Humans are primed for survival to respond to situations where there are dangers or threats. Some of us, including some children, react more quickly or more intensely to situations that might indicate danger.
- Physical symptoms of anxiety are more easily triggered in children with “anxious temperaments”.
- Sometimes stressful events trigger problems with anxiety.
- Learning may also play a part in the development of an anxiety disorder. They may learn that the world is a dangerous place.
- Family member’s responses to the world can contribute to the child’s ideas about what is dangerous or not.

Common Types of anxiety disorders

Social phobia – extreme levels of shyness and fears of being seen in a negative light. Avoid a range of social interactions such as talking to new people, speaking up in class or performing in public.

Separation anxiety – fear and distress at being away from the family. Commonly a fear that something bad will happen to a loved one when they are separated. School camps can be problematic.

Generalised anxiety disorder – when children have excessive and unrealistic worries about a broad range of possibilities, such as things that might happen, past behaviours, schoolwork or how popular they are.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder – Child is affected by persistent unwanted thoughts, often about dirt or germs, or sometimes a need for symmetry. To try to stop the thoughts the child feels compelled to repeat a particular action, such as washing his or her hands or repeated counting.

Assessments and psychological support

- Psychological supports are very helpful for anxiety. Medication may be helpful in severe cases.
- Early intervention is important. School based social and emotional learning programs that build resilience and coping strategies can be very helpful for children with less severe anxiety symptoms.
- Supporting families is crucial to help the family members also provide support to the child as he or she learns new coping skills and practices them in situations they may have previously avoided.
- For more severe signs of anxiety, a referral to a mental health professional can be helpful for an assessment. This could include exploring other mental health difficulties as well.
- Psychological support for anxiety typically involves teaching children to reduce avoidance and use more effective coping skills, such as relaxation, and learning how to replace unhelpful thoughts with helpful self talk.

Example of one way families can support a child with generalised anxiety

This child fears being late, especially for school. She constantly asks questions like, 'What's the time?', 'Are we going to be late?' and 'What will happen if I'm late?'

This child could be encouraged and rewarded to:

- Arrive only five minutes early to music class (and ask only two questions about being late).
- Arrive on time to a friend's house (and ask only two questions about being late).
- Arrive five minutes late to another friend's house (and ask only two questions about being late).
- Arrive at school five minutes before the bell goes (and ask only one question about being late).
- Be late to a music lesson by one minute (and ask only one question about being late).
- Arrive at school one minute before the bell goes (and ask only one question about being late).
- Be 15 minutes late to visit a friend's house (and ask no questions about being late).
- Arrive at school as the bell goes (and ask no questions about being late).
- Arrive five minutes late to music (and ask no questions about being late).
- Arrive at school 10 minutes after the bell (and ask no questions about being late).

Support children and families

Teachers, as well as parents and carers, can:

- Role model brave behaviour and making mistakes (no one is perfect).
- Support children to be brave and face their fears, even when they don't want to. You may remind them of a time they were scared or worried but gave it a go anyway. Reward all positive steps in facing a fear.
- Try to limit excessive reassurance-seeking and avoidance behaviours.
- Break larger goals into small steps that children can succeed with. For instance, Charlie could practice giving presentations to one family member, then to the whole family, then to a small group of classmates (see http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/anxiety_stepladder_approach.html).
- Help children learn relaxation skills, including breathing slowly to calm down.
- Teach children helpful self-talk. For instance, when James says things like “I never get it right” or “I'm stupid” you could encourage him to say “I'll try my best” and “everyone makes mistakes”.

Other ideas for school...

- Set structures and routines. Knowing what to expect can help to reduce worry in children. Where possible, let children know in advance of upcoming events, changes in usual teachers etc.
- Problem solve together, rather than focusing on 'right' or 'wrong' answers.
- Consider the classroom environment to support children with anxiety (eg. seating arrangements to minimise anxiety or distractions, how individual presentations can be given).
- Help children break assignment or classroom tasks down into smaller chunks.
- Be mindful of timed activities and testing situations. Some children with anxiety may perform poorly with time pressures.
- Plan ahead for school excursions and school camps when a child has particular fears or concerns.
- Have a safe person or place (eg. where they can read or listen to music) for students when they are overwhelmed and anxious.
- Work with the parents/carers as a team; with separation anxiety, you may develop a clear plan together (eg. drop off details, strategies to assist calming the child, how the parent will say goodbye)

Programs that support children with anxiety in primary school

- [FRIENDS for Life](#) is a well-validated program that includes strategies such as understanding body clues and feelings, learning relaxation skills like deep breathing, recognising and changing ‘unhelpful’ thoughts into ‘helpful’ thoughts, and ‘coping step plans’ to gradually face a fear, and problem solving.
- [Cool Kids \(school version\)](#) is a cognitive behaviour therapy program that teaches children cognitive behavioural skills that are designed to combat anxiety.
- [Confident Kids](#) is a short-term early intervention program for helping children with emotional and behavioural problems to better manage their feelings and behaviour and improve their peer relationships.
- [Check It Out!](#) is a school-based program designed to create a supportive school environment through whole-staff training, identify students showing symptoms of depression and/or anxiety, and implement a cognitive-behavioural group program for students identified as at-risk.
- [Exploring Together](#) aims to enhance children’s self-esteem, interpersonal and social skills and decrease their problematic behaviour, teach parenting practices and assist with parents’ personal issues, improve parent-child interactions and strengthen family relationships.

For more information on programs to support children with anxiety, see the [KidsMatter Programs Guide](#).



Teacher Anxiety Checklist

	Never	Sometimes	Mostly
1. Shows many avoidance behaviours			
2. Procrastinates over tasks in school			
3. Is a perfectionist			
4. Is overly conformist			
5. Is hypersensitive to criticism			
6. Has poor social skills			
7. Is unsure of self			
8. Becomes upset over changes in routine			
9. Requires constant reassurance			
10. Worries a lot			
11. Cries easily			
12. Complains frequently of headaches and stomach-aches			
13. Is scared of facing new situations			
14. Is shy			
15. Is eager to please			
16. Seems very imaginative			
17. Oversensitive			
18. Lacks concentration			
19. Is persistent			
20. Easily embarrassed			
21. Fears failure			
22. Won't go on school camp			
23. Cries when separated from parents			
24. Daydreams or seems preoccupied			
25. Has only one close friend			
26. Excessively checks what they have to do			
27. Irritable			
28. Fears appearing silly			
29. Refuses to use the school toilets			
30. Has chafed hands			
31. Is defiant			
32. Appears immature			



Dr. Marilyn Campbell

1 Shows many avoidance behaviours	Charlie
2 Procrastinates over tasks in school	Charlie
18 Lacks concentration	Charlie
24 Daydreams or seems preoccupied	Charlie
26 Excessively checks what they have to do	James

6 Has poor social skills	Charlie
8 Becomes upset over changes in routine	Charlie
11 Cries easily	Charlie
17 Oversensitive	
12 Complains frequently of headaches and stomach-aches	Charlie
23 Cries when separated from parents	Charlie
27 Irritable	James
32 Appears immature	Charlie

5 Is hypersensitive to criticism	Charlie
7 Is unsure of self	Charlie
10 Worries a lot	Charlie
14 Is shy	Charlie
20 Easily embarrassed	Charlie
21 Fears failure	
28 Fears appearing silly	Charlie

3 Is a perfectionist	James
4 Is overly conformist	James
13 Is scared of facing new situations	
15 Is eager to please	James
16 Seems very imaginative	James
19 Is persistent	James



Danny the Frightened Dinosaur

Written by Marilyn Campbell PhD



Illustrated by Melissa Bates



Jafi the Nervous New Boy

Written by Marilyn Campbell PhD



Illustrated by Melissa Bates

Kids Matter



Cilla the Worried Gorilla

Written by Marilyn Campbell PhD



Illustrated by Melissa Bates



Anthony the Shy Alien

Written by Marilyn Campbell PhD



Illustrated by Melissa Bates



Carla the Terrified Koala

Written by Marilyn Campbell PhD



Illustrated by Melissa Bates



Dig the Fearful Pig

Written by Marilyn Campbell PhD



Illustrated by Melissa Bates



Beulah the Anxious Bully

Written by Marilyn Campbell PhD

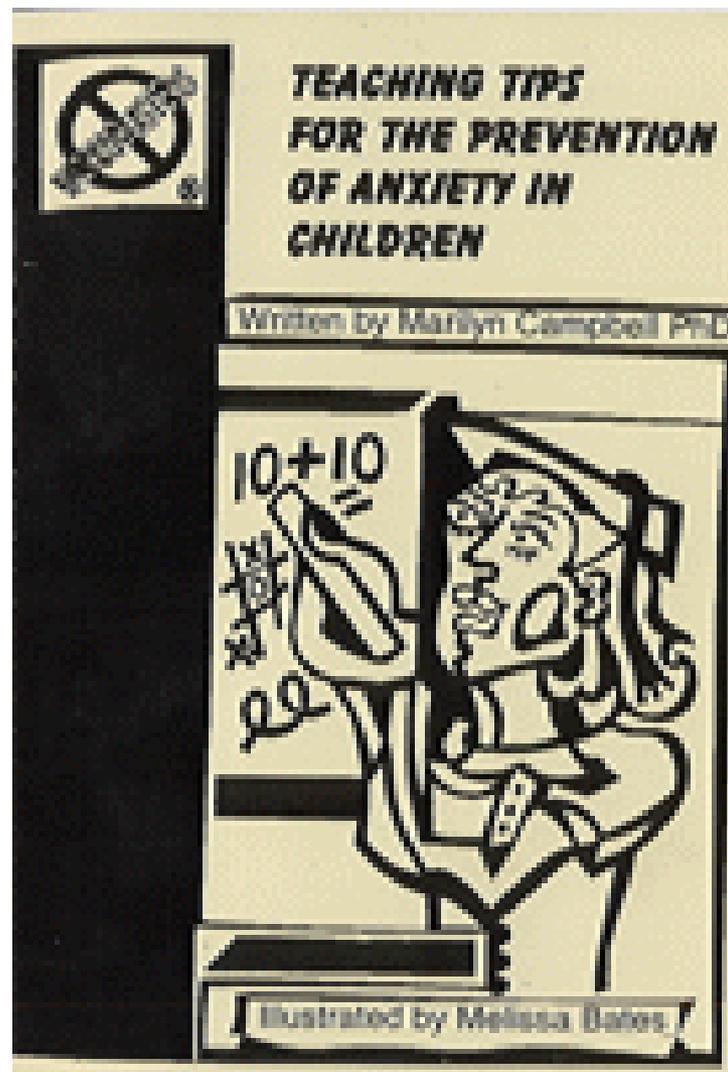


Illustrated by Melissa Bates



Dr. Marilyn Campbell

Teachers' book



Dr. Marilyn Campbell

Parents' book



A is for Anxiety

Written by Marilyn Campbell PhD



A parent's guide to
managing children's
anxiety

Illustrated by Melissa Bates



Dr. Marilyn Campbell

Physical symptoms, no physical cause

When a child presents with physical symptoms and no physical cause can be found, see a GP who will TAKE TIME to...

1. talk to the parents
2. talk to the child
3. if the family admits the school is concerned, talk to the school

Talking to the school can involve talking with multiple teachers: home room, special ed, counsellor

REPEAT THE ABOVE AS NEEDED.

TIP: Remember the family may be embarrassed to mention school issues, so a letter from the school can be really helpful in starting this conversation.



Dr. Michaela Baulderstone

Signs of anxiety

'Orange flags' are present in both children for possible anxiety.

Charlie VS James

Separation anxiety VS Very outgoing

Social anxiety VS Not aware of social mores (blurting out, not waiting for turn)

Day dreamer (or worryer) VS Active, competitive (trying to feel sense of control in his world)

Distractable VS Perfectionistic to point of negative self talk

Seems overwhelmed, needs support to initiate work VS Anger (hard to get away from when "fails")

Stomach aches and increased need for care VS Intrusive ("why" about having to move out of home)



Dr. Michaela Baulderstone

Causes of anxiety

The GP will need to see the child over several visits.

GPs discover many possible causes and contributors including:

- temperament
- personality
- familial tendencies (genetics and environment)
- family stressors (economic, relationships)
- developmental problems typically seen by GP's (the ones that school measures and parent measures have not been able to improve)



Dr. Michaela Baulderstone

Charlie's and James' symptoms

Charlie

- Charlie's tummy ache started 3 weeks ago.
 - Mum can't remember how it began because the family had "a very stressful week" as finances were tight and the family was having trouble paying the rent on time. Charlie volunteers at this point that there was "too much yelling".
 - The tummy aches are typically in the mornings. They never occur in the evenings.
 - The leg pains happen early in the night and Mum usually gives Charlie some Panadol and lets him climb into bed with Mum and Dad for the rest of the night.

James

- Mum reports James seems really well. "He's almost too well."
- "I can't keep up and I am constantly telling him not to do this or that. He even knocked over furniture leaping from couch to couch while we were trying to sort out the rent that weekend."

Likely outcome:

Referral to child psychologist and starting conversation with parents regarding psychological support for them

TIP: Once the GP has received recommendations from the child psychologist, THEN the GP is in a position to make recommendations to the school.



Dr. Michaela Baulderstone

Q&A Session

More about KidsMatter

- KidsMatter is an Australian mental health and wellbeing initiative set in primary schools and early childhood education and care services.
- It's unique because it brings together all the most important people in a child's life .
- Research clearly shows that children who are mentally healthy are better able to meet life's challenges. They are also better learners and have stronger relationships.
- Good mental health in childhood lays the foundations for the future, and it is never too early for families to start supporting the mental health of children.

More about KidsMatter

The KidsMatter website has children's mental health information for primary schools, Early Childhood services, Health and Community professionals and families:

 www.kidsmatter.edu.au

Subscribe to one of our e-newsletters:

 <https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/enewsletter>

Visit us on Facebook and Twitter:

 www.facebook.com/KidsMatterForFamilies

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Thank you for your participation

- Please ensure you complete the *exit survey* before you log out (it will appear on your screen after the session closes). Certificates of attendance for this webinar will be issued within two weeks
- Each participant will be notified, in the few working days, when the recording and supporting resources associated with this webinar will be available online.
- The next KidsMatter webinar will be in February 2016 and will focus on infant mental health. Each participant will be notified when this webinar is open for registrations.
- For more information, visit www.kidsmatter.edu.au/webinars.

**Thank you for your
contribution and participation**