

Professional Learning



Supporting anxious parents

by Michael Grose

Twenty-first century parents seem to be an anxious group. Increasingly they are bringing concerns about their children's school performance, behaviour and levels of happiness to the attention of teachers – issues that past generations of parents would never have considered problems.

The impact of parental anxiousness

It's tempting to say that anxious, fretful parents raise anxious, fretful children but that's not entirely accurate. Anxiousness, like sensitivity, has a genetic component. Some children, like their parents, are predisposed to experiencing anxiousness, which isn't helped if they have a parent who is a worrier. In these cases, worrying and fretting becomes the new norm for a child with an anxious parent.

Anxious, fearful parents are generally very protective of their children, not wanting them to experience hardships, frustrations or difficulties. Lunches left at home are brought to school lest the child go without food for a few hours. Minor skirmishes are brought to a teacher's attention long after the children involved have moved on. Requests are made for grade arrangements that suit their child's wishes. All this interference robs children of opportunities to solve their own problems, to develop coping mechanisms for when life inevitably goes awry, and to develop the self-sufficiency and resilience that will be sorely needed for successful living in later life.

How you can support anxious parents

Schools that experience high levels of anxiety among parents generally need to take a global approach. This might include: implementing classroom programs that focus on resilience and wellbeing; undertaking parenting education that builds understanding of child development, the needs of children at different ages and the importance of resilience training at home and at school; and taking a unified approach to managing the individual concerns of parents.

On an individual level, it's helpful if teachers have a supportive attitude, a genuine concern and a willingness to communicate empathetically with parents. Here are some more ideas about how you can help when working with highly anxious parents:

Take their concerns seriously

It's tempting to say that anxious parents should toughen up and stop worrying about the minutiae of their children's lives. However, while a parent's worrying that her child is struggling in maths may be considered a 'first-world problem', it doesn't make the anxiousness about failure and fear for a child's future prospects any less real and valid than, say, a mother in a developing country worrying about whether her child even has the

chance to go to school. A worry is a worry and needs to be acknowledged.

Provide reassurance

Many parents lack both experience and benchmarks for their children's problems, behaviour or school performance. As a teacher you may have seen hundreds of nine-year-old girls get testy with their peers, twelve-year-old boys struggle with forgetfulness through puberty, or seventeen-year-olds who apply themselves sporadically to their studies, but these are first-time experiences for most parents. You know that kids will get through most of their difficulties, however many parents don't have the benefit of your objectivity or your experience. So you may need to be the person who says to a parent, "It's okay. I know you are worried, but this is normal. Your child will get through this. So will you". Reassurance and comfort are strong allies when working with anxious people.

Move parents from protective to supportive

The usual reaction of anxious parents when one of their kids experiences problems and difficulties is to wrap their arms around the child and protect them. Aim to shift an anxious parent's focus and thinking away from protective and into supportive or teaching mode by asking questions such as: "How can you best support your child right now?", "What does your child need from you while things aren't going his way?", "How can you help her cope over the next few weeks?" or "What can we do to make sure this doesn't happen again?"

Keep communicating about their child's successes

Maintain strong teacher relationships with parents who worry too much. Help them see that you take their concerns seriously and also help them understand that there is more to their child than the problems they see. At times parents can only see their child's deficits, so help parents gain perspective by pointing out their child's strengths and successes.

Put boundaries in place

Anxious parents can be very high maintenance, taking up an inordinate amount of your time and energy as a teacher. Managing their expectations and demands while making sure you have time for all your other tasks can take considerable skill and careful management. Make it known when people can speak with you and when they can't. Look carefully at your availability and be aware that some parents who fit the 'anxious parent' category will keep coming to you with minor issues as long as you allow them to.

It's worth remembering that anxiousness is not a problem by itself. We all experience anxiousness from time to time. But when anxiousness becomes the overarching emotion that drives parent behaviour then it needs to be recognised, taken seriously and managed in ways that minimise its impact on students and teachers.

Big 3

1. Parent anxiety impacts heavily on student anxiousness and wellbeing.
2. Small families, modern media and busy lifestyles are contributing factors to anxiousness.
3. Educators can proactively help anxious parents by forming strong, caring and supportive partnerships



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