

## About Anxiety, Resilience, and Schools

Let's begin with the reality that anxiety is an expected and normal response to the challenges that confront all of us. And, given the events of the past several years, it is not surprising that concerns about anxiety are on the rise, especially as related to student's learning, behavior, and emotional problems. For example, here's an excerpt from

>*COVID-Related Anxiety in Kids: Why It's Happening and How to Help*

<https://blog.cincinnatichildrens.org/covid-related-anxiety-in-kids-why-its-happening-and-how-to-help>

We're seeing more kids with anxiety nationwide.... And I think this makes sense. They have missed out on nearly two years of normalcy. Two years of attending school in a typical way. Two years of uncertainty and disbelief. They've missed major milestones and activities, such as graduation, school dances, field trips and sporting events. Not to mention the developmental impacts of virtual school. Kids learn by interacting with others and through hands-on projects. They develop socially by having to navigate relationships and work things out. Their sense of well-being, especially for teens, is tied to their peers and achievements. And now that some of these activities have started up again, many are anxious about returning to them, because they're out of practice. ...

And from

>*Supporting Kids' Mental Health During the Pandemic*

<https://www.childrenscolorado.org/conditions-and-advice/parenting/parenting-articles/coronavirus-anxiety/>

... you and your kids don't have to pretend that living through the pandemic has been fine if it hasn't. This time has been hard on a lot of people and if your child is struggling with that, they're not alone.... Additionally, many of the positive things that kids rely on to improve their resilience were limited or taken away. This includes interactions with friends and classmates, developing more in-depth relationships with teachers and adult mentors, and inconsistent access to extracurricular activities....

**What's Normal Anxiety?** from <http://www.worrywisekids.org/node/70>

Even in the best of situations, all children experience some anxiety in the form of worry, apprehension, dread, fear or distress. Occasional nervousness and fleeting anxieties occur when a child is first faced with an unfamiliar or especially stressful situation. It can be an important protection or signal for caution in certain situations. In fact there are specific expected fears that accompany each stage of child development.

### **Anxiety: Normal and Necessary**

From toddlers to teens, life's challenges may be met with a temporary retreat from the situation, a greater reliance on parents for reassurance, a reluctance to take chances, and a wavering confidence. Typically these concerns will resolve when the child learns to master the situation or the situation changes....

### **When You Should be Concerned**

Anxiety is considered a disorder not based on what a child is worrying about, but rather how that worry is impacting a child's functioning. The content may be "normal" but help is needed when a child is experiencing too much worry or suffering immensely over what may appear to be insignificant situations, when worry and avoidance become a child's automatic response in many situations, when they feel constantly keyed up, or when coaxing or reassurance are ineffective in moving them through. For these children anxiety is not protecting them, but rather preventing them from fully participating in typical activities of daily life-school, friendships, academic performance....

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\*This document was prepared at the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2022.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

### About Anxiety and Behavior Problems

from <https://childmind.org/article/how-anxiety-leads-to-disruptive-behavior/>

When anxious children are put into situations that trigger their anxiety, they may lash out or have a tantrum in an effort to escape that situation. It's not uncommon for it to happen at school, where demands and expectations may put pressure on them that they can't handle. For instance, if a child who has social anxiety feels criticized, they might throw books and papers on the floor, or punch the person making them uncomfortable. And that behavior can be very confusing to teachers and other staff, since it seems to come out of nowhere.

## Protective Factors and Resilience

*Protective factors* are conditions in families and communities that, when present, increase the health and well-being of children and families. They are attributes that serve as buffers, helping parents who might otherwise be at risk of abusing their children to find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress. For years, researchers have been studying both the risk factors common among families experiencing abuse and neglect and those factors that protect families who are under stress. There is growing interest in understanding the complex ways in which these risk and protective factors interact, within the context of a child's family, community, and society, to affect both the incidence and consequences of abuse and neglect. <http://friendsnrc.org/cbcap-priority-areas/protective-factors>

*The concept of resilience* has as its starting point the recognition that there is huge heterogeneity in people's responses to all manner of environmental adversities. Resilience is an inference based on evidence that some individuals have a better outcome than others who have experienced a comparable level of adversity; moreover, the negative experience may have either a sensitizing effect or a strengthening "steeling" effect in relation to the response to later stress or adversity.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8538863&fileId=S0954579412000028>

As terms such as protective factors and resilience are popularized, confusion and some controversies arise. In particular, an ongoing discussion centers on how to reconcile differences among advocates of addressing risks and those who stress asset building and youth development. Perhaps the following distinctions will help.

*Risk factors.* One way to think about risk factors is in terms of potential external and internal barriers to development and learning. Research indicates that the primary causes for most youngsters' learning, behavior, and emotional problems are external factors (related to neighborhood, family, school, and/or peers). For a few, problems stem from individual disorders and differences. One facet of any emphasis on addressing anxiety is guided by the research on risk factors.

*Protective factors.* Protective factors are conditions that buffer against the impact of risk factors. Such conditions may prevent or counter risk producing conditions by promoting development of neighborhood, family, school, peer, and individual strengths, assets, corrective interventions, coping mechanisms, special assistance, and accommodations. The term resilience usually refers to an individual's ability to cope in ways that buffer. Research on protective buffers also guides efforts to address problems.

*Promoting full development.* As often is stressed, being problem-free is not the same as being well-developed. Efforts to reduce risks and enhance protection can help minimize problems but are insufficient for promoting full development, well-being, and a

value-based life. Those concerned with establishing systems for promoting healthy development recognize the need for direct efforts to promote development and empowerment, including the mobilization of individuals for self-pursuit. In many cases, interventions to create buffers and promote full development are identical, and the pay-off is the cultivation of developmental strengths and assets. However, promoting healthy development is not limited to countering risks and engendering protective factors. Efforts to promote full development represent ends which are valued in and of themselves and to which most of us aspire.

### **Reflections on Resilience**

S. Truebridge & B. Benard (2013). *Education Leadership*, 71, 66-67

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Reflections-on-Resilience.aspx>

**Resilience begins with beliefs.** If you believe in the capacity of all individuals to demonstrate resilience, you won't give up on them. Your actions, words, and behaviors will project that message and will awaken and foster resilience in your students.

**Resilience is a process, not a trait.** It involves how we interact and negotiate with ourselves, others, and our world; how we navigate through the resources that help us thrive; and how we move on a positive trajectory of success and health in the midst of adversity, trauma, and everyday stress.

**Everyone, regardless of age or circumstances, has the capacity for resilience.** It just needs to be tapped.

**The three major protective factors that help us mitigate adversity** and nourish personal strength are caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute.

**Resilience isn't just for people from high-risk environments;** affluent communities can be high-risk for some. The stress incurred from family, peer, and self-imposed pressures to perform and excel academically and socially contributes to an increase in high-risk behaviors among youth in affluent communities.

**Resilience isn't a program or curriculum.** It's not a quick-fix product that schools can buy. Resilience is more influenced by how a teacher teaches than by what a teacher teaches.

**Resilient people identify themselves as survivors rather than victims.** They acknowledge that life comes with challenges and setbacks, which they can overcome.

**Resilience is not just for remediation or intervention.** It incorporates a shift from a problem-based deficit model to a strengths-based one. This model of resilience is positive, protective, and preventive.

**One person's support can be crucial in developing another's resilience.** You can say something to a student or believe in that student in a way that can change his or her life forever.

**Challenging life experiences can be opportunities for growth and change.** Our perseverance through tough times can make us stronger.

**Most people make it despite exposure to severe risk.** Close to 70 percent of youth from high-risk environments overcome adversity and achieve good outcomes.

Credited source: Werner, E., & Smith, R. (2001). *Journey from childhood to midlife: Risk, resilience, and recovery*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

## **Our Centers Perspective on What Schools Can Do to Reduce Student Anxiety and Promote Resilience**

The first and often most important strategies at a school are those that improve the environmental circumstances associated with anxiety. The focus on enhancing school climate highlights many facets of schools and schooling that need to be changed and are likely contributors to student anxiety. Relatedly, many student and learning supports are meant to address factors that are associated with student anxiety.

***Minimizing Anxiety at School.*** From a psychological perspective, examples of what schools can do as a regular facet of daily activities are to minimize threats to and maximize strategies that enhance feelings of (a) competence, (b) self-determination, and (c) connections to significant others.

Key in all this is a well-developed system of student/learning supports that helps personalize instruction and provide special assistance (including accommodations) as needed. Such a system reduces risks and enhances buffers not only by providing a better instructional fit, it facilitates student transitions by enhancing academic and social supports and quickly addresses school problems. And it increases home involvement and engagement in the student's schooling.

***Corrective Interventions.*** In addition to addressing improvements in the school environment, school staff can help correct mild anxiety problems and play a role in addressing anxiety disorders. Here are some immediate strategies that we recommend for teachers to consider:

- (1) Be alert to students in distress, but don't rush to diagnose and label their problems.
- (2) Talk with anxious students (individually or, as feasible, in small groups) and try to determine if the source of problems is related to experiences at school. Find out what the students like and dislike about school and why. Encourage full expression of concerns (e.g., anxiety related thoughts, feelings, and emotions and the situations in which they arise). Identify the positive coping and avoidance responses a student uses.
- (3) Based on what you learn,
  - (a) work with the student to improve school experiences (e.g., plan and implement classroom changes to build on the student's interests and strengths and address needs by minimizing negative experiences and increasing academic, social, and emotional supports and accommodations)
  - (b) help students learn and master effective coping behaviors and attitudes.
- (4) If you haven't the time or feel uncomfortable talking with students about such matters, ask a member of the school's student support staff (e.g., the school's counselor, psychologist, social worker, nurse) to come to the class and find natural opportunities to observe and talk with students who are of concern.
- (5) Based on what is learned from and about any student, a decision must be made about whether the noted distress is so severe that an immediate conference with the family is needed to discuss the problem and what to do. Ask a member of the school's student support staff to participate and add their expertise at the conference.

Given that addressing student problems always involves mobilizing the student to play an active role, enhancing motivation, and especially intrinsic motivation, is a constant concern. Therefore, practices must be designed to account for motivation as an antecedent, process, and outcome consideration.

***Bringing Support into the Classroom.*** Identification of students who are troubled and troubling occurs each day at schools. Given that most teachers and student support staff are painfully aware of such students, it seems ironic that there is a push for schools to formally screen for problems. The big problem for schools is not identification of students in need; the first problem is effectively

providing these students with added supports in the classroom. Teachers cannot and should not be expected to work so alone in addressing students' problems. Aides, volunteers, and team teaching have long been recognized as ways to improve what goes on in the classroom. We stress that schools also need to revamp student and learning supports so that student support staff are teamed with teachers and are available to carry out some of their daily work directly in classrooms to assist teachers in strengthening the support for students of concern. As described above, this will help in deciding the nature and scope of the problem and what to do immediately.

***Promoting Positive Development.*** Essentially, the aims are to enhance youngsters' opportunities, motivation, and capability to develop appropriately and function effectively. This can reduce risks and enhance resilience. Prominent domains for focus discussed in the literature are (1) academics, (2) healthy and safe behavior, (3) social-emotional functioning, (4) communication – verbal and nonverbal, (5) character/values, (6) self-evaluation, self-direction, and self-regulation, (7) vocational and other life roles, (8) recreational and enrichment pursuits. For details on each of these, see *About Promoting Youth Development in Schools* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/yd.pdf>.

## Concluding Comments

Schools must always be sensitive to students' problems and work to enhance supports that effectively prevent and respond to problems. This clearly includes every student as is the intent of the *Every Student Succeed Act*.

At the same time, our Center emphasizes that advocacy for a *special initiative* focused on anxiety will just add to the fragmentation and marginalization of efforts to support all students. Rather than establishing another problem-specific initiative, our Center stresses and provides a blueprint for how schools can embed their focus on preventing and ameliorating emotional, behavioral, and learning problems into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that plays out for all students in classrooms and school-wide. For overviews and in-depth details, see the following free books:

> *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

> *Improving School Improvement*

> *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

all three can be accessed at [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

## For direct links to more resources from our Center and from others,

See our online clearinghouse Quick Finds. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm>

For example, with respect to *anxiety* and *resilience*, see the following Quick Finds:

(1) *Anxiety* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/anxiety.htm>

Examples of other Center Information and Practice Resources that can be accessed from this Quick Find are:

> About Anxiety Attacks

> About School Adjustment

> About Social Anxiety and Schools

> Addressing Student-Athlete Anxiety

> Back-to-School Anxiety

> Fidgety Students

> A Personal Look at a Student's Selective Mutism

> Students and Anxiety Problems

> Students in Distress

> A Student's Perspective of Test Anxiety

> Student Burnout

(2) *Resilience/Protective Factors* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/resilience.html>

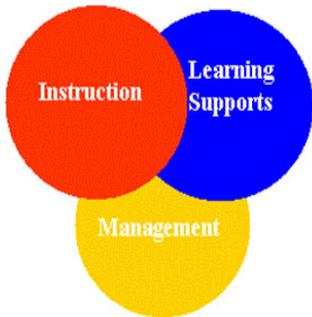
Examples of other Center Information and Practice Resources that can be accessed from this Quick Find are:

- >About Resilience and Schools
- >About Positive Psychology
- >About Promoting Youth Development in Schools
- >About School Engagement and Re-Engagement
- >Barriers, Buffers, & Youth Development
- >Cross-Age Peer Mentorship Programs in Schools
- >Empathy, Compassion, and Addressing Student Misbehavior
- >More About Risk and Resilience
- >Promoting Staff Well-being and Preventing Burnout as Schools Re-open
- >Self-Concept and School Performance
- >About Motivation
- > About Student Voice and Participation
- > Natural Opportunities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning and MH
- > Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Problems at School
- > Supporting Successful Transition to Ninth Grade
- > Youth Participation: Making It Real

*Please feel free to share this resource with anyone you think might find it helpful.*

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For information about the  
**National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports**  
go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>



Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights; transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to promoting whole child development, advancing social justice, and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.

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