MODEL OF PRACTICE

Welcome to the *Teaching Primary Students with Anxiety* Model of Practice. This resource has been developed for primary school teachers who work with students who have anxiety.

There are seven practice briefs in this Model that describe key practices that can be used with anxious students.
The seven practice briefs are:

1. Recognising Anxiety
2. Collaboration & Family Engagement
3. Creating a Safe Classroom Environment
4. Model and Teach Coping Skills
5. Managing Worries
6. Separation Anxiety
7. Panic Attacks

These briefs align with the three domains of the scope of practice for teachers when working with students with mental health difficulties: **Recognition** of anxiety and its outworkings in the classroom, **referral** and collaboration with appropriate sources of help and effective **support** of students within the classroom.

Each practice brief has been designed to be easy to navigate and contains the following elements:

			
What is it?	**Continuum of Practice**	**What evidence is available?**	**Further Resources**
A description of the practice and what it encompasses	A description of demonstration of the practice at four levels of teaching expertise	Links to available supportive evidence from academic sources	Links to further resources to help support the use of the practice
			
This practice works better if/doesn't work as well if…	**Plan, Implement, Reflect Cycle**	**Considerations**	
Examples of what to look for when the practice is being implented well, and what to look for to indicate it might need some adjustment	A description of implementation of this practice in the classroom and questions to help guide teachers through a Plan, Implement and Reflect Cycle	Points to consider when implementing the practice, such as age of students, involvement of parents and cultural background	

This model is not designed to be prescriptive, but to act as a guideline for teachers who might like to learn more about the best approach for working with anxious students. Different types of anxiety (such as social, separation, generalised) might need different strategies, and it may take time to find an approach that works well for your students. As with all teaching, adjust your approach based on the needs of your specific students, try to involve parents and families, refer back to what has worked in the past, best practice research and things that can be consistently implanted both at home and at school.

This model was developed with a strengths-based approach that assumes that children can experience success in their ability to develop productive coping strategies, grow in their ability to be autonomous and have a voice, engage in learning and social relationship, and alongside professional support, experience relief from anxiety symptoms.

Development

This resource was developed through a process of validation with teachers, health professionals and parents. Australian primary teachers and wellbeing staff were also involved in the co-design of the final practice briefs.

The author would like to thank all the participants who contributed their time and expertise to help produce this resource and gratefully acknowledges the importance of lived and professional experience in the creation of this resource.

Licence

Enquiries and feedback regarding this resource can be directed to the author,
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PRACTICE
BRIEF 1

Teaching Primary Students with Anxiety

RECOGNISING ANXIETY

Some of the things you might observe if a student has anxiety:

Behaviour

You observe:

- Social difficulties, shyness
- Fidgeting (nervous agitation - playing with nails, chewing lips, holes in jumpers)
- Irritability
- Easily fatigued
- Becoming emotional/crying easily, meltdowns, disproportionate to what caused it
- Self-soothing behaviour (excessive eating, hair playing, vocalisations, physical movements – rubbing, jiggling, pressure seeking, seeking small spaces)
- Difficulty separating from caregivers (separation anxiety, see *Practice Brief 6: Separation Anxiety*).

School Work

You observe:

- Concentration difficulties (this may look like inattention/ distracting others)
- School performance not matching ability
- Shyness about speaking in front of or with others
- Preoccupation with achievement/perfectionism
- Rigid or "sticky" thinking (may look like difficulties with problem solving, inability to try things a different way or just getting 'stuck' easily)
- Difficulties with transitions (from home to school, between activities at school)
- Often requests or requires adult help (needs the teacher's attention often), needs reassurance
- Avoids certain situations or people repeatedly
- Unwilling to take risks
- Over-compliance
- Sensory or executive overwhelm (noise, lists of tasks, expectations/demands).

Student talks about:

- Anticipatory worries (Worries that occur prior to an event or situation, such as a test "What if….")
- Worried/fearful thoughts
- Negative self-talk ("I'm stupid").

Body Sensations

Student complains of:

- Feeling sick, nauseous or unwell
- Stomach-aches or headaches without a medical cause
- Sweating/clammy hands
- Muscle tension (sore or achy muscles)
- Racing heart (fluttery feeling in chest)
- Heavy feeling in chest.
- Having restless or twitchy feelings in their body
- Tiredness and fatigue

You observe:

- Shaking
- Shallow breathing/holding breath
- Using the bathroom often.
- Vomiting

The 5 F's

Behaviours could be predominately fight, flight, freeze, faun or flop (or a combination).

Fight	Flight	Freeze	Faun	Flop
Defiance or refusal to comply - Aggressiveness - Irritability and moodiness ("agitated")	Avoidance of school, classes or tasks - Leaving the classroom (running away or refusing to enter) - Frequent toilet breaks/ trips to sick bay	Excessive need for routine and predictability - Shyness, hiding, refusing to talk - Frequent need for reassurance - Being indecisive or shut down - Flat affect (low or no emotional tone to voice, blank expression)	Overly compliant - Preferring to remain invisible - Lack of boundaries - Perfectionism/ people-pleasing	Total shutdown – of decision making, thinking - Student sits down, lies on the ground, collapses

What is it?

Helping students get support often begins with a first step of recognition that there is something happening for that student that is causing them to not function as well as they normally would. This first step of recognition is so important because it paves the way for other steps to be taken to activate networks of support, including professional help, involvement of other school staff and parents, and specialised classroom adjustments.

Recognition of the symptoms of anxiety in the classroom may be difficult because anxiety can manifest in different ways in different environments and can co-occur with other emotional and behavioural problems. For example, it is relatively common for students with anxiety to appear outwardly calm at school, but experience big emotions, meltdowns and tantrums when they arrive home at the end of the day. Additionally, many of the symptoms of anxiety tend to be internal – that is, you can't always see them outwardly as big behavioural changes.

The list provided above is not an exhaustive list of symptoms but does provide some things to look for across the broad dimensions of bodily sensations, schoolwork and behaviours. It also offers the framework of the Five F's, which draws from trauma-informed education, to help make sense of the types of behaviours, feelings and thoughts a student with anxiety might experience.

Continuum of practice

GRADUATE: Teachers are able to notice signs that a student may be experiencing difficulties due to anxiety, and can plan a simple conversation with the student about their observations.

EVOLVING: Teachers are independently monitoring their students for signs of anxiety, Conversations with students are more sophisticated and demonstrate active listening and empathy.

EMBEDDING: Teachers are able to build up a picture of anxiety functioning over a period of time. and communicate effectively with other staff and parents about concerns.

EXCELLING: Teachers are able to self-reflect on their own practice and advocate for and mentor other teachers in demonstration of this practice

This practice WORKS BETTER if…

- The student feels comfortable sharing with you and you have an established rapport or relationship
- You have process or framework for observing, monitoring and talking with students about their mental health
- You have some background knowledge of the behavioural signs and symptoms of anxiety in children
- Your confidence is improving in terms of ability to recognise and respond appropriately to students with anxiety
- You have good data-keeping systems to ensure your notes and observations are stored appropriately.

This practice DOESN'T WORK as well if…

This practice doesn't work as well if…

- You are trying to diagnose a student with a mental health difficulty rather than just neutrally observing what you notice
- You try to push discussions about a student's behaviour with a judgemental, punitive or overly concerned tone
- You don't attempt to substantiate your concerns with other school staff members and/or the student's parents
- You base decisions off one observation, rather than a series of observations over a few weeks (note: the only exception to this would be if the student demonstrates one-off behaviour that is extremely dangerous or concerning, such as extreme aggression or expressing a wish to kill themselves, which may warrant immediate action and follow up).

This practice is demonstrated when STUDENTS ….

Are open and receptive to talking to you about their feelings and what other things might be going on for them.

What evidence is available?

Johnson, C., Gross, M., Jorm, A., & Hart, L. (2023). Mental Health Literacy for Supporting Children: A Systematic Review of Teacher and Parents/Carer Knowledge and Recognition of Mental Health Problems. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 26(3)*, 569–591
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-023-00426-7

Further Resources

All Play Learn (2023) *Recognising and supporting student anxiety for primary school teachers*
https://allplaylearn.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Anxiety-tool-AllPlay-Primary-school-teachers.pdf

BeYou (2024) *BETLS Observation Tool (behaviour, emotions, thoughts, learning and social relationships)*
https://beyou.edu.au/resources/implementation-tools/betls-observation-tool

Anna Freud. Mentally Healthy Schools (2025) *Emotion wheel for children*
https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/resources/emotion-wheel-for-children/

Plan

If you are wanting to use this practice, chances are you already have observed behaviours and reactions in the student that would lead you to think there might be something going on for them.

Decide on the best way to observe the student and record your observations. This might be through using a specific observation template (see **Further Resources** for an example of this), looking at the student's academic progress (through information such as assessment data) or just through taking some rough notes. Keep in mind that you may need to make observations over the course of a couple of weeks.

Implement

Observe the student

You might want to look at the following behaviours or use the list at the beginning of this practice brief.

- How the student engages in social interactions: how they enter the classroom, how they interact with parents or caregivers, how they interact with teachers, how they interact/don't interact with other students
- Transition periods (between activities) and the student's response to them
- The presence of repetitive behaviours (soothing behaviours, chewing lips, hair or clothing) or avoidant behaviour (might look like distracting other students)
- Disproportionate emotional reactions to situations or events, emotional regulation ability ("flipping their lid")
- Student's ability to concentrate, complete work and make decisions
- Student's expression of fears or worries.

For each observation, ask yourself if, based on your experience, this is typical or atypical behaviour for the student, or what is developmentally normal (i.e. are they experiencing things like fear of scary monsters that would be considered developmentally normal for their age and developmental stage?). You might want to check in with other staff members to confirm this.

You can also use data (such as assessment data, reports or attendance data) to add to the picture.

Monitor the student's behaviour over time

Behaviours on their own may not mean much and you may need to see behaviours over the course of a few weeks in order to build up a more complete picture. In the meantime, build relationship with the student. Be a safe person for them. It can be helpful to share your observations with another school staff member who may have contact with the student. This way you can determine if the observations are repeated across different environments within the school (e.g. physical education class, art class).

Talk to the student about your observations

When discussing your observations with the student, it is best to use language that is non-judgemental and creates space for them to add input. However, you may also need to step in to help the student to organise their feelings and their decision making if they are not in a space to make those reflections.

- You can let the student know what you've observed by using the language: "I've noticed that….." and letting them know what you've seen.
- When discussing feelings, make sure to use words that label that feeling "You seemed like you were frustrated/angry/upset" Most students benefit from the use of visual prompts to help organise feelings – some examples include a feelings thermometer or an emotion wheel. These can be helpful in that they allow you to get a baseline measurement of how the student is feeling. Additionally, it allows the student to see changes or progress over time and allows you to build rapport.
- Ask the student about what they are feeling: Are they worried about a situation that could be changed by adjusting classroom supports?
- When starting the process of suggesting supports or solutions, use language that invites problem solving, such as "I wonder how we could change this…?" "If you had a magic wand, what would you change…..?"
- Offer explicit problem-solving scaffolding, with a focus on what steps can be taken to fix this together (What's the problem? How bad is the problem? Use numbers – such as "What is this out of 10?" "This could be changed to a lower number" What are possible solutions? What are the steps to get there?)

Take care of yourself during these conversations, they can be difficult and bring up emotions for you! If you can keep your feelings regulated, that will help students to be able to be regulated around you.

Reflect

After the conversation, continue to monitor the student. If they need extra support, make a referral on to internal school wellbeing and supports. You could also encourage help-seeking (external support or within school) by getting parents and carers in the conversation as well. *See Practice Brief 2: Collaboration & Family Engagement* for more information on how to involve parents or carers in conversations about anxiety.

Cultural considerations

Feelings/emotions are not openly talked about in some cultures and may not have been modelled to students. Take this into consideration when labelling emotions and encouraging the student to feel comfortable seeking help.

Student has a trauma background

Students who have experienced trauma may react differently to events or situations. If the student has not had healthy attachment modelled to them, they may retreat, shut down or abscond from the classroom when asked to talk about their feelings. If the student doesn't want to talk to you about how they are going, try to activate other people they may know who may be able to help them, and start the process of exploring support options with their parents or carer based on your observations only.

Masking/different environments

All students may present differently in different environments. Students who have anxiety may be overly compliant at school but experience meltdowns or overwhelm at home. Just because something hasn't been observed in the classroom doesn't mean that it isn't causing issues in other environments. If a parent brings concerns to you that are not being seen at school, it is best to err on the side of believing the parent. Try not to use dismissive language (such as, "We don't see that here at school"). Instead, try to understand more about the situation by talking to the student and parent.

Different Personalities

Some students are more sensitive and more highly strung, and many children worry about things at some time. This may not necessarily mean they have anxiety. Try to avoid labelling students with a mental health disorder when they haven't seen a mental health professional. In the meantime, don't dismiss their emotions, validate their feelings, model non-anxious responding, and emphasise having a plan.

To validate a student feelings means to accept them and reflect them back to the student using descriptive words

PRACTICE **BRIEF 2**

Teaching Primary Students with Anxiety

COLLABORATION & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

What is it?

Collaboration with parents and with other school staff is important in providing support for students with anxiety. Because anxiety can look different across different environments, parents and teachers need to come together to inform each other about effective strategies and to gain a more complete picture of the student's functioning.

Effective collaboration involves the skilled use of professional knowledge and relationship building to establish rapport and determine how to best communicate with parents and other school staff, and skills in planning to implement actions agreed upon.

Parents and schools being on the same page is also likely to improve social and academic outcomes for a student with anxiety.

Continuum of practice

GRADUATE: Teachers are able to communicate concerns about a student's anxiety, in consultation with parents, student and/or wellbeing staff.

EVOLVING: Teachers are able to identify next steps and, with support, can generate supportive strategies in collaboration with parents and other school staff.

EMBEDDING: Teachers are able to independently generate supportive strategies, effectively communicate this with parents and other schools staff, and are able to give meaningful and supportive feedback to students regarding their progress.

EXCELLING: Teachers are able to self-reflect on their own practice and advocate for and mentor other teachers in demonstration of this practice.

This practice WORKS BETTER if…

- Parents are actively engaged, showing interest and openness in discussions.
- There's regular, clear communication between you and the parents about the student's progress and challenges.
- Both you and the parents are on the same page with strategies, and there's a sense of teamwork.
- There is consistency between home and school, as seen in conversations with the student.
- Parents come to you outside of scheduled meetings with updates and concerns, they don't wait for things to worsen and are proactive in addressing issues.
- Parents are responsive to your communications (emails, meetings, etc.).
- Parents share valuable insights about the student's home life and how they're doing outside of school.
- Parents are willing to try strategies you discuss and are open to feedback.
- There's a positive, problem-solving attitude from both sides, with a focus on what's best for the student.

This practice DOESN'T WORK as well if…

- Parents are unresponsive or hard to reach.
- You and parents are not on the same page regarding strategies.
- Home strategies are not being implemented or followed through.
- Parents are seeking advice from other staff or specialists rather than working with you.
- There is little improvement in the student's anxiety, but the level of anxiety exhibited by the parent appears to increase.
- Conversations feel one-sided or defensive, with no real progress or willingness to adapt.
- Parents seem frustrated, disengaged, or disconnected from the process, and there is a lack of trust or respect in communication.

Plan

See Practice Brief 1: Recognising Anxiety for help with identifying behaviours or feelings which may indicate a student is experiencing anxiety and how to observe and document the student's behaviours and anxiety triggers in the classroom.

Share your initial observations with other school staff to gather more insights about how anxiety is affecting the student across different environments.

Schedule a meeting with parents and other relevant staff members, such as counsellors, special education staff or wellbeing or leadership staff. Who needs to be at the meeting will depend on your school structure.

Speak to allied health professionals involved for input (if possible and available). Read or gather information to support the development of a plan and your initial meeting with parents or carers.

Implement

To quickly build rapport with parents, start with a friendly and open approach, showing interest in their child. Listen carefully and show empathy for the parents' concerns

Start by sharing your observations or concerns in this meeting ("I've noticed a few things, can I share what I've noticed…."). Be gentle and respectful when discussing mental health. Focus on what's best for the student, like helping them succeed at school.

Use clear, neutral language and focus on solutions and what functioning is being **impacted** (e.g. the student is having difficulty concentrating, they are unable to participate in class due to emotional outbursts etc.)

Communicate clearly, find common ground, and agree on helpful strategies. Avoid blame and show respect for differences of opinion.

Set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals for reducing anxiety and increasing classroom engagement. Establish both short-term goals (e.g., immediate coping strategies) and long-term goals (e.g., developing sustained coping skills). Goals should be set across home and school settings to ensure consistency.

Reiterate (repeat or sum up) the actions for the meeting so that everyone is on the same page about the actions that will be taken.

Reflect

Set up a regular communication plan to share updates and progress. Communicate with parents to ensure strategies are supported at home for consistency.

Implement the agreed-upon strategies in the classroom (see *Practice Brief 4: Model and Teach Coping Skills* for help with developing supportive strategies).

Regularly check the student's progress with parents and school staff. There are a few ways you could do this:

- Take classroom notes that document observed student behaviours and responses to triggers
- The most obvious time to do this would be before and after an anxiety-inducing events, but this assumes that the anxiety is observable (i.e. the student externalises the anxiety in some way)
- Ask other colleagues, the student's parents, or wellbeing staff to see how they have perceived the implemented strategies to be working
- Ask the student directly what they think is working and not working for them
- Use short student surveys or self-reflection to gauge students' feelings and how supports are working for them
- Track participation and time spent settling into the classroom
- Note frequency and types of interventions used.
- Measure time taken for student to settle after anxiety-triggering events
- Track how often interventions are needed.

Make necessary adjustments to the plan based on feedback and the student's evolving needs.

Do not try to diagnose the student or speculate on the absence or presence of a specific mental health difficulty. It is better to focus on sharing your observations and how the student's functioning is being impacted in the classroom

CALD families

Be aware that different cultures might view mental health in their own way, and discussions about emotions and feelings might be uncomfortable with some families. Try to respect their beliefs and try to understand where they're coming from. Explain mental health in a way that fits with their values, but keep it clear and supportive. Keep the conversation positive by focusing on the student's strengths and growth, not just what's going wrong. You might want to investigate getting an interpreter if one is available.

The student enters your classroom with a diagnosis

Focus on how to best support the student in the classroom based on their diagnosis. Find out what's worked for them before and adjust it for your classroom. If possible, work with any allied health professionals involved to keep everything aligned.

When families are hostile or unavailable

Keep the focus on what the student needs to succeed, and build trust with parents through respectful, ongoing communication. If meetings aren't possible, offer other ways to connect like emails or phone calls, as some parents might find face-to-face meetings hard. Keep in mind that, parent's experiences with school when they were younger, positive and negative, can affect the way they engage with their child's school.

Be aware that parents of anxious students may also be anxious themselves

If parents are anxious themselves and require a lot of reassurance, be understanding. Recognise that parent's own worries might affect how they react to their child's anxiety. Work with parents to find solutions that feel supportive and helpful for both the student and the family. Helping the student will likely have a flow on effect to the family.

Avoid assigning blame to the parent/s

Remind parents that anxiety can be caused by many things, not them and is not a personal failing. Reiterate that anxiety broadly affects people from all over society and isn't a reflection on success, either parenting success or the student's ability to experience success.

How effective is it?

Swan, A. J., Kagan, E. R., Frank, H. E., Crawford, E., & Kendall, P. C. (2016). Collateral Support: Involving Parents and Schools in Treatment for Youth Anxiety. *Evidence-Based Practice in Child and Adolescent Mental Health,* 1(1), 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/23794925.2016.1158625

Mælan, E. N., Tjomsland, H. E., Baklien, B., & Thurston, M. (2020). Helping Teachers Support Pupils with Mental Health Problems Through Inter-Professional Collaboration: A Qualitative Study of Teachers and School Principals. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research,* 64(3), 425–439. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2019.1570548

Further Resources

Hart, Johnson, Kelly, Subasinghe, Glover-Wright and Jorm. *Guidelines on providing mental health first aid for supporting children: How to talk to adults about your concerns for a child's mental health and seeking help.* Melbourne: SCMH Press; 2025
https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/research-groups/centre-for-health-equity/equity-and-mental-health/supporting-child-mental-health

Australian Education Research Organization (2025) Family engagement
https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/family-engagement

PRACTICE **BRIEF 3**

Teaching Primary Students with Anxiety

CREATING A SAFE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

What is it?

The classroom environment includes how teachers set up the classroom physically, how they relate to students, how students relate to each other, the emotional climate of the classroom, and the routines, norms and expectations associated with the classroom. In short, it is an environment that contributes to student development, both in learning and in mental health.

We know that certain things can help contribute to a safe classroom environment for students with anxiety. This includes consistent routine and structure, a teacher who understands the importance of emotional competence, a warm and steady relational style, and awareness and support for student's needs. Changes to the classroom environment will likely affect, and be helpful to varying degrees, for all students, not just students with anxiety. The universal nature of this practice means that changes can be implemented with a view to what would work best for your whole class, but adjustments can be made based on feedback from the students who have anxiety.

Continuum of practice

GRADUATE: Teachers can identify elements of their classroom environment that would support students with anxiety.

EVOLVING: Teachers can adjust the classroom environment in response to student anxiety, with support.

EMBEDDING: Teachers can independently generate supportive classroom environment adaptations for students with anxiety, effectively communicate this with parents and other school staff, and are able to engage with students to gauge their response to the adaptations.

EXCELLING: Teachers can self-reflect on their own practice and advocate for and mentor other teachers in demonstration of this practice.

This practice WORKS BETTER if…

- You set clear routines and structures for the day, and helps students to understand the cues and expectations (e.g. the students can verbalise/explain expected behaviours such as 'during learning we…' or 'when the tidy up song comes on we…')
- You provide pathways in the classroom for students to access regulatory places and tools, such as using a break card
- You engage in positive interactions with students guided by safety, trust and mutual respect
- You build a sense of safety and belonging in the classroom with your students
- Your leadership supports the use of classroom spaces for wellbeing across the school.

This practice DOESN'T WORK as well if…

- Students do not know how to access spaces and tools in the classroom
- The classroom is inconsistent (routines, behavioural expectations, the teacher's response to students)
- Students do not have a voice or a way to communicate their wants, needs and feelings
- Students do not feel like they belong
- The teacher does not factor in individual needs of the students, and instead applies a blanket understanding of behaviour, wants or needs.

This practice is demonstrated when STUDENTS…

- Have a voice and feel like they are seen and heard
- Feel like communication is strong, positive and effective, and works both ways
- Can access the supports they need
- Utilise spaces in the classroom safely and positively.

Plan

Consider the physical environment of your classroom. This includes the physical space it takes up, what furniture and equipment is in it, and how it is laid out. Some questions you might want to consider in ensuring the physical layout of your classroom can help support students with anxiety include:

- Is there an area accessible in the classroom for calming down? Are there areas for play?
- Is the classroom too overwhelming? (some of the walls could be free of displays, hanging things from the roof may be overwhelming, natural/softer lighting could be better for some students)
- Could you set up a calm corner for students who need to slow down? e.g. sensory boxes/tools (fidgets, squishy balls, jars of glitters), pillows/blanket, makeup brushes, books/colouring/drawing, if possible, a dark space (tent or cubby – to provide a low sensory environment), access to calming music (use headphones) or noise-cancelling headphones, weighted toys/blankets?
- Could you set up a 'wiggle corner' for students to move and get energy out? (could be outside of the classroom) e.g. open space, mini trampoline, exercise prompt cards or physical prompts around the room (do star jumps, yoga poses), exercise balls, bike space/desk bikes?
- Is the physical layout of classrooms a part of a whole-school inclusion plan? Consider if you could have a talk to administration or leadership to ensure there is support for this in the school.
- Can you spend more time outside in nature- can you do lessons outside, or read the class story under a big tree or do a morning meeting in a shady patch of the garden?

Consider the 'emotional environment' of your classroom or your classroom culture. This includes the relationship that you form with your students and the sense of belonging that they feel in being part of your classroom. Some questions that you might want to consider in ensuring the emotional environment of your classroom can help support students with anxiety include:

- How are you welcoming the students to the classroom? Are you remembering names? How are relationships being built with students so that they feeling seen?
- How are you going with not being dismissive or invalidating, and validating and supporting student's feelings, acknowledging that student's response are based on their perspectives and problems can feel really big? (letting students feel their feelings, within the rules you have set in place for the classroom)?
- Are you considering the tone/manner in which you speak (using a calm tone, pace and cadence, ratio of positive to negative interactions) and your body language? Students often pick up on non-verbal cues. Using language that is high in demands can be stress-inducing for some anxious students. Offering limited choice can help students feel a sense of agency (rather than 'I need you to finish this task in 5 minutes and pick a book to read', try 'Would you like to start your reading now or after you finish the task?')

Consider the routines and rules that you want to establish for your classroom:

- Factor into your daily routine time for soothing and calming practices (e.g., music, singing, movement, rest, group circles focused on connection, games, laughter)
- Have clear strategies to allow students to ask for help, what they need etc. Do students know how to ask for a break, to use the toilet or to let you know they need support? How can you set up a system that is clear and easy to use for all students in your class?
- Try to have a visible daily routine displayed somewhere each day (and refer to it at the start of each day).
- Try to ensure there is consistency of expectation and boundaries as responding inconsistently to students can be confusing.

Depending on the age/ability of the students, giving them a say in what tools and strategies they would like to have access to in the classroom can be very beneficial. You may want to have a class meeting at the beginning of the year to see what they would like to have in a calm corner, the wiggle corner or as part of the classroom routines.

Implement

Once you have created a list of considerations that you need to implement in your classroom, you may wish to chat to other colleagues to determine if there is access to resources to support the classroom setup, and what the normal practice is in your school.

Reflect

Check in with your student/s with anxiety to give them a say on what's working for them and what's not. This might be more appropriate after the classroom has been running for a term or so.

Age of student

Strategies used for communication in class will need to be varied for age/language skills (e.g. younger and/or CALD students may require more visual elements, whilst older students may prefer written options). Younger students may need more supervision or support when accessing certain areas of the classroom, whereas older students can be more competent to use areas independently. Wiggle corners may be more appropriate for younger students.

Appropriate use of break-out spaces

Consider the use of break-out spaces in your setting and monitor when and why they might be being used. For example, if you have an anxious student that always tries to access a break during maths, it may be more useful to be curious about what they are finding tricky about these sessions, rather than just simply continuing to allow them access this space during this time.

What evidence is available?

Bølstad, E., Koleini, A., Skoe, F. F., Kehoe, C. E., Nygaard, E., & Havighurst, S. S. (2023). Emotional competence training promotes teachers' emotion socialization and classroom environment: Effects from a TIK-in-School pilot study. *Mental Health & Prevention, 30,* 200273. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2023.200273

Hughes, K., & Coplan, R. J. (2018). Why classroom climate matters for children high in anxious solitude: A study of differential susceptibility. *School Psychology Quarterly,* 33(1), 94–102. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000201

Further Resources

Richardson, S., Kelly, M., Whiting, C., & Peddie, B. (2023). *Effectively managing classrooms to create safe and supportive learning environments.* Australian Education Research Organisation. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-01/effectively-managing-classrooms-create-safe-supporting-learning-environments-aa.pdf

Australian Education Research Organization (2024) Rules and routines https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/rules-and-routines

PRACTICE
BRIEF 4

Teaching Primary Students with Anxiety

MODEL AND TEACH COPING SKILLS

What is it?

Coping Skills are helpful practices that a student can use to help constructively deal with emotions, behaviours, feelings and sensations that may arise because of having anxiety. It is not necessarily important that all students practice the same type of coping skills. All that matters is that you assist students to identify and/or practice their skills over the course of their time in your classroom. Importantly, they often must be modelled and taught to students explicitly.

There are lots of different categories of coping skills, some examples have been described below.

Sometimes, students with anxiety may have developed some unhelpful coping skills already as a way of managing the uncomfortable feelings that crop up when they feel anxious. Efforts to teach helpful coping skills will also sometimes need to be implemented alongside attempting to reduce the use of unhelpful coping skills. Sometimes just raising your student's awareness of their use of something that may not be helpful (like constantly checking in with you), alongside the teaching of helpful coping skills is enough to help shift their use. Some examples are described below.

Unhelpful coping skills serve a purpose, they reduce distress. When you take them away or prevent a student from using them, there must be something adaptive that they can draw on, or they may feel overwhelmed. It is recommended that teachers focus on modelling helpful coping skills first before attempting to address unhelpful coping skills.

Some examples of coping skills

HELP SEEKING/SOCIAL SUPPORT

- Listing 2-3 people to connect with when needing support
- Talk to a friend or parent
- Ask 3 before you ask me (encourage student to ask for help from other students first, before they ask you).

BODY AWARENESS

- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Body movement: stress press, turtle, spaghetti body
- Meditation
- Short, intense burst of movement (star jumps, run on the spot).

CALMING/GROUNDING

- Listening to relaxing music or sounds
- Colouring, crafting (knitting, crocheting, weaving)
- Sensory play (running hands through sand, stroking a soft blanket, cuddling a toy, fidget spinners, sitting in beanbag/under blankets)
- Sensory attention drills (5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can feel)
- Calm corner or space.

BREATHWORK

- Deep belly breathing • Box breathing
- Hot chocolate breathing.

THOUGHTS

- Self-affirmations • Self-compassion •Worry box.

PROBLEM SOLVING

- Visualization
- Explicit problem-solving frameworks (e.g. six thinking hats).

Some examples of potentially unhelpful coping skills

AVOIDANCE

Avoidance is a behaviour; it means to go out of the way to avoid undertaking a particular activity or task. Some common avoidance patterns for students with anxiety might be around social situations (e.g. the student spends their lunchtimes/recess with the teacher or with other adults rather than other students), school environment (e.g. the student takes sick days to avoid going to school) or presentations or tasks that involve speaking in front of the class.

REASSURANCE SEEKING

A student who is seeking reassurance may be labelled as 'nagging' or 'clingy'. They may ask you to repeatedly show them how to do something, even though you have explained it a few times already, or seem to need to ask a lot of questions to clarify details about a novel event coming up. Reassurance seeking can be a student's way of seeking to reduce distress around unknown or uncontrollable things.

PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism is a personality trait that can be present to a various extent in most students, but some anxious students develop quite rigid thinking patterns and expectations for themselves and others as a way of coping with their feelings of anxiety (note: perfectionism can be present in students without a mental health diagnosis, and it is only when perfectionism starts to interfere with life that it becomes a problem). Perfectionism may look like a student who needs to get 100% on everything, or it could look like a student who has trouble starting anything because they feel worried about making a mistake.

MODEL AND TEACH COPING SKILLS

PRACTICE **BRIEF 4**

Continuum of practice

GRADUATE: Teachers can communicate concerns about a student's coping skills, in consultation with parents, student and/or wellbeing staff.

EVOLVING: Teachers can identify next steps and, with support, can generate some helpful coping skills in collaboration with parents and other school staff.

EMBEDDING: Teachers can independently generate coping skills, effectively communicate this with parents and other school staff, and are able to give meaningful and supportive feedback to students regarding their progress.

EXCELLING: Teachers can address unhelpful coping skills alongside the modelling of coping skills, and can self-reflect on their own practice and advocate for and mentor other teachers in demonstration of this practice.

This practice WORKS BETTER if…

- You are teaching or modelling skills when the student is in a calm, regulated state (students will not be able to learn new skills if they are highly dysregulated, and they will have difficulty remembering how to do them).
- You are providing ample opportunity for students to practice their coping skills with feedback from yourself or others.
- You are teaching an optimal number of coping skills - around 2-3 main ones.
- You review skills at the end of the year, preferably in a collaborative consultation with students, to see what worked and what didn't.
- You are reducing your supportive scaffolding over time, provided skill building is progressing.
- You are modelling skills yourself in classroom interactions.
- To expect that at times, progress may plateau or go backwards and that is to be expected, sometimes it will be easier and sometimes it will be harder.
- Both you and your student have an understanding about what realistic expectations are for this skill (behavioural change can be difficult, particularly in classroom settings. Be kind to yourself!).

This practice DOESN'T WORK as well if…

- You don't have knowledge of what coping skills might be appropriate for your student.
- If you aren't familiar with the skill or you haven't used them yourself (even just a short practice).
- You don't have a full picture of the student and their background (see *Practice Brief 1: Recognising Anxiety* and *Practice Brief 2: Collaboration & Family* for the necessary pre-requisites for performing the practices in this brief).
- You don't have an awareness of how a student is going, and you don't put supports in place to calm down or reduce distress before you teach skills.
- You are constantly checking in and reminding the student what they need to do.
- You allow your own frustration and expectations to drive your interactions with students.
- The goal or expectation for the student is not clear or explicit enough or you are pushing too fast or hard.
- The skill is not aligned with what parents, carers and/or health professionals are already doing or have suggested should be implemented.
- The student is not invested in trying and can't see the relevance.

This practice is demonstrated when the STUDENT….

- Is able to use their coping skill when needed (either when prompted or unprompted).
- Is showing improvement in their classroom emotional regulation.
- Is able to recognise a shift in how the strategies are making a change for them.
- Is generalizing the skill into other areas of their school or home life.
- Is beginning to build a stronger capacity to explain or show how they are feeling (interoceptive

MODEL AND TEACH COPING SKILLS

PRACTICE **BRIEF 4**

Plan

Identifying helpful coping skills

There are a number of ways you might want to identify a helpful skill for the student to learn. You may need an awareness of situations that a student may need to use the skill within. This may be done through observing areas the student struggles with or by chatting to them to get an idea of where they are finding it hard to cope *(see Practice Brief 1: Recognising Anxiety)*.

Firstly, the skill should align with the student and their needs. It is important to connect with the student's parents or carers as to what strategies or coping skills are being used at home, or to establish what skills are already being used in other classes or being taught through a mental health professional.

If there is no care plan, or no coping skills suggested, you could explore ideas with the student around what helps them when feeling anxious and talk with the student about helpful strategies that they can use to manage anxiety. Sitting down with them and talking to them also has the benefit of building relationship and helps the student to build confidence in self-knowledge.

Identifying unhelpful coping skills

Observe the student. How does their anxiety affect the student's ability to function well in the classroom, and what things might they be doing to compensate? Do this in tandem with a health professional and parents if possible. Practice non-judgemental acceptance. Students develop these coping skills because they are the best thing their brain knows how to do at the time.

Interoception

It can be helpful for students to learn their own cues to be able to use their coping skills, and for them to have some level of awareness of when they are starting to feel overwhelmed. Coping skills may need to be taught alongside emotional recognition and interoception – helping students to notice and pay attention to how emotions feel in their body and label them. Not all students will be capable of this, and younger students may need to be cued by you or other staff (see the *Further Resources* section in this practice brief for further information on interoception and how to teach it).

Learning about the skill

Once you've identified the skill, it may help to practice the skill a few times yourself so you can break it down into its component parts (see the **Further Resources** section for videos and other links to helpful demonstrations of coping skills for anxious students.) Stories or books are another way of modelling a coping skill for students, or even a set script.

Consider if teaching coping skills should be completed in a group setting, for example circle time at the beginning of the day. This may be the best approach if you want to avoid singling out a student, or if you have limited time to be able to model skills one-on-one.

Consider if the student may need a visual reminder for their skills. This might be as simple as a laminated cue cards that show a step-by-step process for the coping skill they can have in their pencil case or at their desk, or something written in their diary. For younger students and those with low emotional recognition and awareness, you may need to cue them to use their skills when you notice that their anxiety is escalating. It may also be helpful to coach friends of the student to also be able to cue you.

At first, it might be helpful to pick one area in which to practice the skill or within a discrete task, such as reading, which allows the student to see how it works in one situation.

Implement

Make sure the student is calm. You might want to help them orientate to learning a new skill by asking them to do a sensory orientation, like rubbing or scrunching their hands together.

Tell them that they are going to be learning about a skill that will be helpful for them in managing their anxiety.

Ask them to try to feel in their body the way the feel when they are worried. Helping them to identify how they feel internally will mean they can find a self-cue to use the skill.

Model the coping skill, show what it looks like, then ask them to do it (I do, we do). You could also use other tools to show what the coping skill looks like, including social stories or showing the student a video.

Get them to show you what it looks like, give feedback that specifically targets what aspects are good and which ones might need to be practiced again.

When the student cues you that they are distressed or when you notice that they seem this way, acknowledge that you see the student and prompt them to use coping skills (either verbally or with a hand or body language signal).

Build in the opportunity to have some breaks when practicing coping skills, this helps the student to reset, and try again when it doesn't go the way they hoped. Spaced practice (distributing skills practice over time rather than forcing all the learning to happen in a big block) can be more beneficial for skills acquisition.

MODEL AND TEACH COPING SKILLS

PRACTICE **BRIEF 4**

Reflect

Review how the student coped during the situation. This could be via a quick check in (thumbs up/thumbs down). Try to have more reviews as the student is learning the new skill and pull back support as they begin to demonstrate mastery over time. If the student is having trouble implementing the coping skill, go and remodel the skill to the student.

Make sure that you show the student the correct way to respond to worry and anxiety, by modelling what it looks like to be non-anxious and have good coping skills yourself. These could be brave behaviours (e.g., willingness to take risks), calm, non-anxious responding to situations in the classroom, openness (e.g. by talking about strategies you use, such as positive self-talk, problem-solving approaches, and relaxation techniques) and confident body language.

Skills must be reinforced and used regularly. You could use a variety of ways to reinforce skills, from praise to formal prizes (such as sticker charts). It's important to check what is the "currency" for the student – what is something that they would value?

Remember that coping skills are something that are added to over time, and that this is not about 'curing' or 'fixing' the student. Add any skills the student is using regularly to their individualised education/support/learning plan.

Classroom management

An effective classroom management plan is useful is allowing the teacher to have space to work one-on-one with students when needed, especially in the early stages of reinforcing coping skills.

Age of student

Younger students may prefer to be shown coping skills through play or explicit modelling, older students may be more able to handle a direct conversation about the skill.

CALD students

Keep in mind that a student's family background may have impacted what skills they may have already learnt or utilised. For more information on how to collaborate with families in helping to support students with anxiety *see Practice Brief 2: Collaboration & Family Engagement.*

Student finding it too difficult

Pull back from skill use in stressful situations and consider if practicing the skill in neutral situations first may be more helpful. Be encouraging, learning new skills might be difficult at first, but reassure the student that they are able to do hard things with support.

What evidence is available?

Ruocco, S., Freeman, N. C., & McLean, L. A. (2018). Learning to Cope: A CBT Evaluation Exploring Self-Reported Changes in Coping with Anxiety Among School Children Aged 5–7 Years. *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist, 35*(2), 67–87. https://doi.org/10.1017/edp.2018.8

Further Resources

Erica Frydenberg and Jan Deans (2011) Early Years Coping Cards – Set. ACER Press, Melbourne
https://shop.acer.org/early-years-coping-cards-set.html

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30VMIEmA114

Thought bubbles
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70j3xyu7OGw

Belly breathing
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KssedxpbLpg

Taming the Anxiety Monster
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JP6qNv9Gxq8

Affrunti, N. (2018) Perfectionism: *Helping Handout for School and Home. In Helping handouts: Supporting Students at School and Home National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP)
www.nasponline.org/publications

Interoception

Goodall, E. (2016) Interoception 101 Activity Guide, Department for Education, South Australia

Lean, C., Leslie, M., Goodall, E., McCauley, M., and Heays, D. (2019) Interoception 201 Activity Guide, Department for Education, South Australia
https://www.education.sa.gov.au/docs/support-and-inclusion/engagement-and-wellbeing/ready-to-learn-interoception-kit.pdf

PRACTICE **BRIEF 5**

Teaching Primary Students with Anxiety

MANAGING WORRIES

What is it?

Students with anxiety can feel intensely worried. This can show up in situations that require the student to face evaluation by a group, or when they must perform in front of other students. These types of worries are known as *evaluative fears*, because the worry is thought to stem from fear of judgement or evaluation (negative evaluation) or fear of being the focus of attention (positive evaluation). This can be particularly present in students who have social anxiety difficulties, who may find interactions with other students to be worrisome. Some of the areas that students might experience worries about might be reading in front of the class, speaking to new people, recess or lunchtimes, tests or exams (such as NAPLAN).

Although the student may benefit from teaching some coping skills to help deal with their fears and manage their emotions *(see Practice Brief 4: Model and Teach Coping Skills)*, they may also benefit from some of the strategies in this practice brief that focus more on their communication, academic and social skills.

Continuum of practice

GRADUATE: Teachers can identify when students experience disproportionate worries and hold preliminary conversations about creating a plan to address these.

EVOLVING: Teachers can adjust at the academic, process and output levels in response to student worries, with support.

EMBEDDING: Teachers can independently generate supportive adaptations for students, effectively communicate this with parents and other school staff, and are able to engage with students to gauge their response to the adaptations.

EXCELLING: Teachers can self-reflect on their own practice and advocate for and mentor other teachers in demonstration of this practice.

This practice WORKS BETTER if…

- You can identify the cognitive and academic skills students need to support themselves when they experience worries.
- You understand that fear of things like tests or presentations may be more about emotional responses rather than a lack of skill.
- Support that is offered is removed over time to build student's confidence.

This practice DOESN'T WORK as well if…

- The student is pushed too fast to reach their goal, before they are ready and they are feeling unmanageable distress.
- Praise, encouragement or rewards are not tailored to the student and specific for their needs.
- You do not have a graduated plan for addressing student skill building and confidence (this means starting the student off in an environment or situation that is low-level with lots of support and increasing the complexity or difficulty of the situation over time, whilst stepping back explicit scaffolding).

This practice is demonstrated when STUDENTS….

- Are self-motivated and engaged in the process.
- Feel more confident in use of strategies.
- Promote further goal setting themselves, and can see transference of skills to other areas as well.
- Perspective on their ability to cope has changed.

MANAGING WORRIES

PRACTICE **BRIEF 5**

Plan

Before putting in place a plan to help with a student experiencing worries, it is important to understand the student, where they are at and whether there are important emotion coping skills that they could use or are already using to help (see ***Practice Brief 1: Recognise Anxiety*** and ***Practice Brief 4: Model and Teach Coping Skills*** for more information).

Implement

Various strategies can be helpful in supporting anxious students who experience worries to be able to be succeed at a feared task or in a feared situation. Some examples are below:

- Chunking means taking big problems and make them smaller and in this way, helping to make the problem solvable. You can use chunking to break down a big task that involves worries into discrete steps, and tackle one step at a time. For example, for students with social anxiety that means they feel fearful attending places with large groups of people, such as assemblies, you could chunk attendance into small parts, such as gradual entry into the space when there are less people in it, attendance at assembly with the use of headphones or assistive technologies, gradually working up to greater amounts of time spent at assemblies.
- In conjunction with chunking, you could reduce the stakes of a presentation or high-worry task and then gradually increase the challenge. Examples include allowing a student to perform a musical piece in front of younger students before they perform in front of older students or pre-reading (allowing students to practice a piece of reading before they read with the class).
- Allowing students to rehearse or practice speeches or presentations, or how they might act during social situations, by rehearsing questions to group discussions, for example.
- When using sensory tools or adaptive technologies (such as text-to-voice technologies), try to use these as temporary measures until students are gradually released off these tools. Have a management plan that is time bound and negotiated with students and parents to reduce use over time.
- It can be helpful to give the student responsibility in other areas, such as putting up the school flag or feeding the school animals to give them a sense of ownership over their environment and school.

Reflect

It is important to monitor the student progress and their response to their progress. You could use check-in tools, such as a feelings thermometer or a rating scale, to see how the student is going. Build in some rewards for sticking with goals, such as certificates, rewarding them in front of other students or peer-mentoring other students. You can also communicate with families about progress and any change in student plans.

At first, students may need more of your support when learning new strategies and may feel defeated more easily. Over time, as they experience success, they may require less support, and you can gradually withdraw explicit supports. When goals are mastered, assist the students to make new goals, think about transferability and where these skills can be applied elsewhere.

The ultimate purpose of this practice is to help student to understand that their worries are not going to inhibit or restrict their ability to achieve things in life.

Age

Younger students may not have the language abilities to express and understand their emotions. Having visual tools for check-ins may be helpful for younger students.

What evidence is available?

Yeo, L. S., Goh, V. G., & Liem, G. A. D. (2016). School-Based Intervention for Test Anxiety. *Child & Youth Care Forum,* 45(1), 1–17.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-015-9314-1

Further Resources

Australian Education Research Organization (2025) Scaffold practice: Guide student learning and gradually remove scaffolds
https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/scaffold-practice

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PRACTICE
BRIEF 6

Teaching Primary Students with Anxiety

SEPARATION ANXIETY

What is it?

Separation Anxiety is one of the most common anxiety difficulties that children can experience. It can look like extreme distress and upset about actual or imagined separation from caregivers (such as Mum, Dad or grandparents). This can mean that students display reluctance to go to school or other places where separation might occur, are excessively worried about harm or accidents happening to their caregivers (or experience a vaguer sense of dread), may experience bodily complaints, such as headaches or stomach-aches and often request to contact or see caregivers when away from them. They may also display distress or oppositional behaviour (tantrums, screaming, pleading, crying) when separated from their caregivers, often during transition periods, such as at the beginning of the school day.

Continuum of practice

GRADUATE: Teachers can, in collaboration with other staff members, identify when separation anxiety is affecting a student, and can involve others in making a preliminary plan.

EVOLVING: Teachers take part in a team approach to implement strategies to support a student with separation anxiety.

EMBEDDING: Teachers can independently make adjustments to plans, track progress and communicate openly with caregivers.

EXCELLING: Teachers can self-reflect on their own practice and advocate for and mentor other teachers in demonstration of this practice.

What evidence is available?

Students with separation anxiety often need support from a mental health professional, but schools are incredibly important in coming alongside families and the student to help support their transition into school.

Sacks, H., Comer, J. S., Pincus, D. B., Camacho, M., & Hunter-Romanelli, L. (2012). Effective Interventions for Students with Separation Anxiety Disorder. In C. Franklin, M. B. Harris, & P. Allen-Meares, *The School Services Sourcebook, Second Edition: A Guide for School-Based Professionals.* Oxford University Press.

Further Resources

Separation Anxiety in babies and children (2025) Raising Children's Network
https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/behaviour/common-concerns/separation-anxiety

Separation Anxiety (2024) BeYou/Beyond Blue
https://beyou.edu.au/resources/fact-sheets/mental-health-issues-and-conditions/separation-anxiety

SEPARATION ANXIETY

PRACTICE **BRIEF 6**

Plan

See Practice Brief 1: Recognizing Anxiety for help with identifying behaviours or feelings which may indicate a student is experiencing separation anxiety and how to observe and document the student's behaviours and anxiety triggers in the classroom.

Consider the severity of the separation anxiety. What are the impacts that it is having on the student? How long do they take to transition into class? How much time does the caregiver have to stay for? What is their distress level when separating? How long has this been going on for?

Once you have determined severity and considered that a plan may need to be put into place to help support transitions, consider the resources that available to you. Some questions for consideration might include:

- Is there someone to supervise your class or the student during drop offs so that there is a consistent adult with them?
- Where is the student being asked to enter the classroom at the start of the day, and are there alternative entry points to the classroom that could be used if the student is transitioned slowly in?
- Should the student arrive with everybody else, or do they enter separately?
- Does the student need a transition activity to start the school day? Have you got the resources to support this? (staffing, rooms, support/learning officers, alternate spaces. Examples of activities for transitions: reading (self-directed), puzzles, games (matched with a peer or an adult), having some sort of directed job or responsibility (such as collecting chicken eggs, unlocking doors).
- Will you need to plan time during the school day to check in with the student?
- What is your classroom setup like, especially on arrival (Music playing? Displays? Atmosphere and classroom culture?) How do your students enter the classroom? What do they do as the opening activity? Consideration of these factors could help pinpoint areas that the student may be having difficulty with.
- Consider the time. You might want to agree on a time for the student to transition that is most suited to them feeling comfortable.

Depending on the student's capability, you may want to involve them in discussion around what supports will be put in place.

Before putting a plan into place, it is important to, as much as possible, engage with the student's caregivers. Caregivers can play a huge role in how these supports go and may need to stay to help with the transition. *See Practice Brief 2: Collaboration & Family Engagement* for more information.

Implement

As the student transitions away from their parent, continue to acknowledge the student's feelings ("I know you feel yucky…it's safe to feel that…this is a safe place to be even though you feel discomfort").

For any transition into either a pre-determined activity or into the classroom, safe predictable routines and expectations are important.

If an activity is chosen to help the student to transition, this needs to be time limited. Make sure this is communicated clearly to the student. Try to choose an activity that is helpful to calm them down, rather than one that gets them hyped up.

You may need to judge when it is appropriate to transition based on how dysregulated the student is (are they calm and just wanting to stick to the preferred task? Or is the time chosen not long enough? Readiness may look like the student being able to successfully manage their distress without constant teacher input).

At any point during the transition into an activity or a transition into the classroom, the student may become distressed. If the student is distressed:

- Allow the emotion – big emotions in students often need a safe space to be expressed. Reassure them that this is ok.
- If appropriate, try a distraction, such as changing the topic of conversation, engaging the student in a topic of interest, telling a funny story, or showing them something interesting. This helps them reengage and connect with adult that they're with.

It can be helpful once the student has transitioned to check in on them throughout the day. Start with encouragement/ praise for staying throughout the day ("So proud of you, It's going really well…I noticed that you have engaged in this activity"). Ask the student 'How do you think the day is going?'

As much as it is possible, try not to call or contact parents, as reengaging with parents can reinforce the anxiety. Use your judgement as this may be modified based on student need. For example, you might allow an older student with irregular anxiety to speak with their parent.

Reflect

Continue to monitor student progress as they transition from their parents, as they transition into classroom and throughout the day. Observe: How did the goodbye go? How did the activity go? Was it easier to transition them into the classroom? Look for areas of improvement (such as less time taken to transition).

If student is not being supported by activities after about a week of implementing them, consider changing them. You could consider adjusting the time these activities take, the type of activity, the supports you have in place around transitions, or the staff involved.

It may be helpful to communicate regularly with the student's parent about how the plan is going. This could be done by giving feedback at end of day through either an email or a phone call. Over time, the frequency of this contact can be reduced as the student and parent settle into routine.

This practice WORKS BETTER if…

- You remember to validate the students' feelings – keep in mind that in a student's world, separation from their caregivers may feel like everything.
- You try to focus on helping the student to accept their feelings as well as accepting that they will be able to experience those feelings whilst coping.
- You remind the student of their strengths and the progress that they have made and can make.
- You can regulate and validate your own feelings. Supporting a student who is dysregulated or distressed can take some regulation of your own feelings. Be kind to yourself and make sure you have appropriate boundaries and self-care plans in place.
- You don't overexplain or talk too much whilst the student is distressed – try to keep choices and alternative options limited.
- You have a plan for collaboration with caregivers (*See Practice Brief 2: Collaboration & Family Engagement*).

This practice DOESN'T WORK as well if…

- You are dismissive of the student's feelings or experiences ("stop being silly…", "You're fine….").
- You are forceful or transmitting your own stress regarding your expectations to the student (look for self-talk patterns that sound like "This shouldn't be occurring", "I should be able to handle this" or "They should be over this by now").
- You have high and inflexible expectations of your own ability to get all students to 'behave'.
- You view separation anxiety as a way that students can misbehave or be deliberately non-compliant.
- Your leadership and school aren't on board with a generalised response to students with separation anxiety.
- You are putting yourself under a lot of pressure to 'succeed' or be perfect.
- You are not listening to, invalidating or not working closely with parents.
- You hold an us vs. them mentality and may view parents as to blame for the student's difficulties.

This practice is demonstrated when STUDENTS…

- Take less time to transition into class and they are able to transition well.
- Are communicating that they are finding the transition easier.
- Are able to separate from caregivers with ease.

Parents are also anxious or struggling with the transition

Parents can also experience distress during the transition period, and many parents find their child's distress to be upsetting. It is important to engage early with caregivers to reassure them that anxiety over separation at school is relatively common and most of the time, transitory.

Reassure the parent that the school has seen this before and understands how uncomfortable it is for both the student and the parent. Help the parent to understand that their leaving can help the student to start to learn that they can cope with their feelings. Students can learn that they don't have to rely solely on their parents, and that they have others who can support them.

Validate the parents' feelings of distress over the separation, but make sure you're on the same page in terms of language (the student can do it, it's possible, even though it is difficult).

Help the parent recognise that, as much as possible, morning routines before school, and the school drop off itself, should be as consistent as possible. If parent is finding it overly difficult to leave their child, you may want to ask the parent if there is another parent or friend that might be better suited to do drop-off.

For student with complex needs

You should be aware that many other diagnoses can overlap with separation anxiety, and you may need to also work within the recommended processes for that diagnosis. For students with complex or additional needs, such as ASD, the severity of separation anxiety will impact on the use of these practices. Very severe separation anxiety (i.e. results in significant disruption to the school day, intense distress for the student, and is linked with missing school) may need further adjustments such as incremental attendance goals, alternative attendance goals, more intensive involvement of parent or external supports from mental health professionals to help teachers, the student and parents.

Age of students

For younger students, especially those starting the first year of primary school, the parent may also need more support during the separation.

For older students, they may need more support to be empowered to help them to feel good about being at school.

Parents do not want to be or are unable to be involved in a plan

You can still involve the student in any plans to support them. Ensure to still give considerate feedback to parents regardless of their involvement. This may help to open doors to conversation in the future.

PRACTICE
BRIEF 7

Teaching Primary Students with Anxiety

PANIC ATTACKS

What is it?

A panic attack is a sudden and intense experience of overwhelming physical sensations, coupled with intense fear. Panic attacks tend to be time limited (i.e. they do not last for long periods of time), but they can cause students to feel drained and tired afterwards. During a panic attack, a student may be difficult to communicate with and unable to calm themselves.

Panic attacks feel extremely distressing; and students can experience physical symptoms like a racing heart, increased rate of breathing, shaking/weakness, nausea and a strong sense of fear or impending doom. Importantly, panic attacks cannot physically harm students, although they may feel like it at the time.

Panic attacks may be something a student experiences as a one-off, or they might be more prone to having them at times of intense stress. Sometimes students may experience a panic attack in response to specific cues or triggers, and sometimes they can occur with no discernible triggers.

Continuum of practice

GRADUATE: Teachers can, in collaboration with other staff members, identify possible signs of what a panic attack looks like in the classroom and are aware of the school protocol for responding to them.

EVOLVING: Teachers can implement basic calming techniques and communicate effectively with the student to assess their needs.

EMBEDDING: Teachers are first responders to a panic attack and demonstrate calm and non-confrontational management, whilst using strategies to support the student to return to a regulated state.

EXCELLING: Teachers demonstrate expert knowledge in responding to panic attacks and implementing advanced de-escalation techniques, and advocate for and mentor other teachers in demonstration of this practice.

How effective is it?

Evidence suggests that panic attacks in children are relatively rare. Unfortunately, there is little research on supports for panic attacks for students within a school environment.

Further Resources

Hasan, S. (2023) *Panic Disorder Factsheet (for Schools)*. Nemours Kids Health
https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/panic-factsheet.html

Autism Awareness Australia (2025) *Behavioural challenges for school aged children*
https://www.autismawareness.com.au/navigating-autism/behavioural-challenges-for-school-aged-autistic-children

This practice WORKS BETTER if…

- You are able to manage your own emotions and remain calm during student distress
- You prioritise the psychological safety of the student
- You try to be at the same physical level as the student (down low if they are down low)
- You use non-direct, non-confrontational communication and body language.
- You are aware of and/or can recognise when a student is progressing towards a panic attack and can take appropriate steps.

This practice DOESN'T WORK as well if…

- You have a dismissive attitude towards student's distress, seeing it as silly or attention seeking
- You don't recognise when you need support or additional help
- You feel a time pressure, are in a hurry to 'solve the problem', or stuck in trying to get the student to complete tasks instead of focusing on what the student needs in that moment.

This practice is DEMONSTRATED when ….

- Students are beginning to recognise/have awareness of when they are progressing towards a panic attack
- Parents are educated about what the student is experiencing and open to talking through what supports might be appropriate for their child.

Parenting styles

The impact of parenting styles may be something to consider in the maintenance of panic attacks. Sometime, intolerant or authoritative parenting may be linked to student's inability to cope with distress, which may cause them to feel overwhelmed more easily.

Impact of neurodivergence/language difficulties

Students who are neurodivergent may experience 'meltdowns' which may look and sound similar to a panic attack. Whilst they have some similarities, there are subtle differences between the two. A meltdown is usually in response to feeling overwhelmed (too much/too little sensory input, changes in routine, transitions between activities, being in social situations) and may last for a longer period of time. Panic attacks tend to involve more physical symptoms and are time limited. Of course, there can be overlap between anxiety and neurodivergence and so an approach that seeks to implement approaches that work for both is usually best. You can find more information on meltdowns in the **Further Resources** section.

Plan

It can be extremely difficult to plan for a panic attack, as often they can occur with little prior warning. Nevertheless, it can be good to have a general plan of what to do if a student experiences a panic attack, and with practice, there may be signs you may be able to observe that precede a panic attack.

Implement

During a student's panic attack, stay calm if possible. Remind yourself to take a few deep breaths and focus on helping them and the other students in your class. Your lowest priority is trying to figure out what caused the student's panic attack, instead, focus on helping return the student to a baseline level of regulation.

If you have other students in the classroom, try to get them busy on a task (wordsearch, colouring) to give you space to sit with student. It can already feel embarrassing enough to experience a panic attack, and sometimes intense attention from other students makes it worse.

If it is possible and they can move, take the student to a calm environment that is separate from their classroom (a space with dimmer lighting and low on sensory input can work well). Outside might also work well if it allows them some fresh air. If student won't move – you can bring things to them.

If you can, move yourself to be on the same level as the student. This might be sitting side by side with student or placing yourself at right angles to them. Try deliberately slowing down your own breathing (they may match your own breathing) and modulating your voice (use a calm, low voice).

You don't need to talk all the time, but you can offer the student some reassurances that you are there ("I'm right here, you are safe") or that this will be over soon ("This will pass soon"). The student most likely won't respond to direct questions so it can be helpful to use more indirect communication. For example, you might use a toy to demonstrate how to slow breathing down and use modelling language ("Honey Bear is going to try slowing his breathing down, can you try it with him?")

Sometimes it can be helpful to get the student to focus on a sensation in their body that isn't their panic symptoms – such as squeezing their hands together or using a grounding technique (asking them to focus on the colour of a poster, for example).

Continue to stay with the student until the attack subsides. If you need to, recruit another staff member or adult to stay with the student.

Reflect

Once the panic attack has subsided, the student will likely be feeling drained and tired. You can try and offer them their snacks or water or for the student to go for a walk. They may need some time before transitioning back into class.

Having a panic attack can feel embarrassing and overwhelming for a student. Try to provide reassurance that it isn't their fault, that they are okay and that they were successfully able to make it through.

Try and think about some of the early signs that you might have seen before the student experienced their panic attack, or some of the events preceding the panic attack. If there are signs in the future, you can potentially help mitigate a panic attack by helping the student to calm down at an earlier juncture or even educate the student or their friends on their own signs that they can use as an indication that they need support. You might encourage the student to use communication tools that don't rely on them being able to speak, as this ability can be hard to do when in a panic attack. However, signs can often be subtle or not present at all.

Connect in with the student's parents and with other school staff. If the student has experienced a panic attack in school, this warrants further investigation as parents may have already seen evidence of this in the home. In addition, other staff members may also need to be involved in a plan to help the student, including available health professionals. You can find more information in *Practice Brief 2: Collaboration & Family Engagement.*

The student may benefit from learning some emotion recognition and regulation skills when they are in a calm state – see *Practice Brief 4: Model and Teach Coping Skills*

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