

How to Help Children with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

“Caring for Children’s Mental Health Parent Education Series

Education Bureau 2022

What is “Obsessive Compulsive Disorder” (OCD)?

People with OCD are particularly sensitive to potential crises due to the continuous alarm of the brain, resulting in one or both of the following major symptoms:

Obsessions

- Obsessions are thoughts, urges or images that repeatedly appear in and persistently intrude the mind of people with OCD. Although they know that these thoughts are superfluous and irrational, they cannot stop the emergence of these thoughts. Trying to suppress the thoughts will make them more uneasy
- Common obsessions include fear of leaving things behind, suspicion of making mistakes, worries of food contamination by germs, etc.

Compulsions

- Compulsions are repetitive behaviours that people feel driven to perform, or as if “rituals”, to alleviate his/her uneasiness or anxiety caused by his/her obsessions. Engaging in the compulsions brings no pleasure or satisfaction, nor do they effectively eliminate anxiety
- Common compulsions include washing hands constantly, checking schoolbags repeatedly, requesting family members to answer the same question continually, reciting some words or phrases silently, etc.

People with OCD understand that these thoughts or behaviours are unreasonable and excessive, but they feel lack of control. As people with OCD spend too much time on these thoughts or behaviours, their daily life is being seriously affected (such as taking a long time before they can leave home, failing to complete their homework or revision, being misunderstood by peers, or causing physical discomfort, etc.).

Role of Parents

If I suspect that my child has OCD, I should...

- Seek psychiatric consultation and assessment for my child as early as possible, so that appropriate treatment and support training can be arranged for him/her
- Initiate contact with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), class teacher, the School Guidance Team or school social workers for arrangement of appropriate support services

After my child has been assessed as having OCD. I should...

- Cooperate with healthcare professionals in undertaking the suggested treatment plan to make sure that my child receives the treatments he/she needs and takes medication as prescribed (if applicable)
- Take the initiative to provide the school with the information about my child’s special educational needs as early as possible, including passing his/her psychiatric report to the school for arrangement of appropriate support services
- Maintain communication with the School Guidance Team or school social workers, SENCO, Student Support Team, class teacher and subject teachers to understand my child’s learning and adjustment condition; and jointly discuss appropriate support strategies if necessary

The following strategies may be considered when supporting your child:

Communication Skills and Emotion Management

- Accept the difficulties of your child and understand that he/she does not deliberately act against the guidance of the family
- Teach your child to use exercise such as deep breathing and muscle relaxation to relax themselves and relieve tension
- Be honest with your own emotions and thoughts, pay more attention to the balance of your own physical and mental wellbeing, let yourself have enough rest, and maintain a positive way of parenting to support the growth of your child

Behaviour Management

- Adjust your expectations for your child and jointly formulate mutually agreed behaviour modification plans, such as setting a goal of not washing his/her hands for longer than a certain period of time every time he/she washes his/her hands. According to the therapist’s suggestions and the treatment plan for OCD, family members may set appropriate limits for repetitive behaviours, such as request for suspending the compulsions, restricting the frequency or duration of compulsions, or the number of times in reassurance-seeking, so as to avoid reinforcing their obsessions or compulsions
- Explore and carry out activities that help to relax body and mind with your child, and promote family relations

Support Measures and Strategies

In general, schools may provide the following support according to the needs of individual students:

Helping the Student on School Adjustment

- Cultivate a caring and friendly learning environment to make the student feel safe and cared for
- Arrange school staff to take the student to a safe and quiet environment to regulate his/her emotions when necessary
- Provide individual counselling for the student in need, cooperate in undertaking the treatment plan for OCD when appropriate, improve the student's awareness and understanding of obsessions or compulsions, jointly formulate concrete behaviour modification plans, discuss strategies for dealing with obsessions or compulsions with the student, and appreciate his/her progress in due course

Helping the Student Get Along and Communicate with Teachers and Peers

- Understand that a student's compulsive behaviour is not deliberate opposition and do not punish them for it
- Praise the student's positive personal traits and arrange appropriate class duties or extracurricular activities to enable the student to appreciate his/her own abilities and values
- Teach the student to use visual cues to seek help in coping with obsessions and compulsions (for example, "red light" means asking teachers to intervene and "green light" means that he/ she is trying to deal with it by himself/herself)
- Arrange friendly classmates to participate in group activities with the student, expand his/her social circle, and encourage mutual support and tolerance among peers to avoid reduced interaction due to the students' condition
- If a student's social relationship is affected by his/her condition, teachers may pair up the student with some helpful peers in class, or arrange the class groupings to provide learning or social support to him/her

Engaging the Student in Learning Activities

- If a student is distracted by obsessive thoughts, give brief instructions. Repeat instructions when needed, or give visual cues to help him/her stay focused
- If a student is unable to keep up with the progress of the learning activities due to his/her condition, help him/her use a checklist and set up a work schedule so that he/she can complete the activities gradually
- Provide the student with appropriate classroom support (such as assistance with note-taking) to reduce the load on memory, attention and organisation caused by their condition
- Provide homework accommodations according to the student's needs to reduce his/her pressure
- Provide special examination arrangements according to the student's needs and suggestions from professionals

Strengthening Support and Home-School Cooperation

- Provide intensive support services to students with serious difficulties as needed, such as formulating an Individual Learning Plan, conducting regular reviews and follow-up
- Maintain close collaboration and communication among the school, parents and professionals (such as healthcare professionals, social workers, psychologists, etc.)

Useful Websites

Education Bureau

Homepage of the Education Bureau

<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

"SENSE" Integrated Education and Special Education Information Online Information

<https://sense.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

"Mental Health @School" Student Mental Health Information Online

<https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

Operation Guide on the Whole School Approach to Integrated Education

https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/integrated-education/download-area-and-related-links/ie_guide_en.pdf

Teacher's Resource Handbook on Understanding and Supporting Students with Mental Illness

[https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/types-of-special-educational-needs/mental-illness/Teacher's_Resource_Handbook_on_Understanding_and_Supporting_Students_with_Mental_Illness_\(August%202017\).pdf](https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/types-of-special-educational-needs/mental-illness/Teacher's_Resource_Handbook_on_Understanding_and_Supporting_Students_with_Mental_Illness_(August%202017).pdf)

Department of Health

Child Assessment Service

<https://www.dhcas.gov.hk/en/>

Student Health Service
<https://www.studenthealth.gov.hk/eindex.html>

Social Welfare Department
<https://www.swd.gov.hk/en/index/>

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service
<https://www.hkcss.org.hk/?lang=en>

**Telephone Numbers for Enquiry
Education Bureau**

General enquiries about special education 3698 3957

Hospital Authority

Hospital Authority Mental Health Direct (24 hours) 2466 7350

Department of Health

Child Assessment Service 2246 6659

Student Health Service 2349 4212

Community Resources and Helplines

<https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/en/early-identification-at-the-selective-level/helplines-and-community-resources.html>