

## **How to Help Children with Anxiety Disorders**

### **“Caring for Children’s Mental Health” Parent Education Series**

Education Bureau 2022

#### **What are “Anxiety Disorders” (ADs)?**

Anxiety is a normal reaction towards challenges and dangers. When the danger is over, but the anxiety of a person persists and significantly affects his/her learning performance, social functioning, health condition and daily living, he/she may be suffering from ADs.

Common symptoms of ADs include the following:

- Nervousness, excessive worries and having difficulty to relax
- Physiological symptoms, such as rapid heart rate, muscle tension, gastrointestinal discomfort, sleep problems, etc.
- Withdrawn behaviours and avoidance of difficult tasks
- Restlessness and irritability
- Overreaction to trivial matters
- Difficulty in concentration and decline of memory
- Excessive pursuit of perfection

Common categories of ADs in childhood and adolescence include the following:

#### ➤ Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Having excessive and uncontrollable worries about different daily matters, with various symptoms of physiological discomfort (e.g., headache, stomachache, etc.).

#### ➤ Social Anxiety Disorder/ Social Phobia

Being persistently frightened in one or more social situations with behaviours such as avoiding eye contact, blushing or trembling, and often trying to stay away from activities or contact with others.

#### ➤ Specific Phobia

Having disproportionate fear and panic about specific situations or objects (e.g., animals, dark places, elevators, blood, etc.) and would try to avoid these situations or objects, or even yell or cry in face of such situations or objects.

#### ➤ Separation Anxiety Disorder

Showing developmentally inappropriate and excessive fear or anxiety when separating from emotionally attached individuals (such as parents or caregivers), due to excessive worries about losing their parents or about the possible harm to them. For instance, they may refuse to go to school or make phone calls to their parents frequently in order to feel secured.

### **Roles of Parents**

#### **If I suspect that my child has ADs, 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 ADs, 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 your child’s feeling of anxiety, listen patiently to his/her concerns and do not make hasty comments or blames
- Teach your child to soothe his/ her anxiety by relaxation strategies, such as deep breathing
- Guide your child to think about the core problems underlying his/her anxiety, work out solutions with him/her and encourage your child to confront his/her fear in positive ways

#### **Behaviour Management**

- Inform your child in advance about possible changes in his/her life to reduce his/her worry or panic while facing sudden events

- Carry out appropriate amount of practices or rehearsals with your child so that he/she can gradually come into contact with the environment or things that scare him/her to reduce his/her anxious feeling
- Help your child to set up a timetable so that he/she can gradually complete his/her daily schoolwork, and carry out relaxation activities

Parents' emotional states may also affect their interaction with their children and how their children are disciplined. Parent should:

- Be a good model for your child by facing things or situations you fear bravely rather than avoiding them
- Pay attention to your own physical and mental balance. Give yourself time to rest and relax, and maintain a positive way of discipline to support the growth of your child

### **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**

- Provide the student space and time to regulate his/her anxious emotions
- Explore activities that may help the student relax and let the student participate in these activities when appropriate
- Provide group training or individual counselling for the student in need, enhance his/her social and emotional management and problem-solving skills, and boost his/her sense of competence and self-confidence
- Make flexible arrangement when handling issues related to the students' routines and attendance in accordance with the student's conditions and needs

#### **Helping the Student Get Along and Communicate with Teachers and Peers**

- Praise the student for his/her positive behaviours and personal qualities, as well as his/her efforts in various aspects to enhance his/her self-confidence
- Encourage the student to face anxiety-inducing situations gradually and progressively, and appreciate his/her courageous behaviours
- Arrange helpful peer buddies for the student to build the social circle

#### **Engaging the Student in Learning Activities**

- Arrange appropriate amount of practices or rehearsals for tasks or learning activities that the student is worried about so as to boost his/her confidence
- Adjust expectations according to the student's conditions and abilities. Make accommodations in learning activities, way of questioning and task demands or give additional prompts and assistance to help his/her complete their work step by step. Praise him/her after completion of tasks, so as to strengthen his/her sense of competence
- 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 and 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](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 on 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>