Anxiety: 6-Week Social Emotional Learning Intervention for Elementary School

Counselors

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Abstract

This Brief Resource addresses anxiety and the dire impact anxiety has on student well-being and performance. Anxiety prevents students from focusing, concentrating, feeling safe, grounded, and at ease. There are immeasurable numbers of students who are experiencing anxiety during this pandemic. Social Emotional Learning works to enhance students' innate abilities to improve coping, regulate emotions, problem solve, take on leadership roles, focus on control, mindfulness, optimism, gratitude, communication, and empowerment. These are vital skills to possess in order to survive times when people face adversity. This manuscript will provide a definition of anxiety, symptoms of anxiety, consequences of anxiety, a definition of social emotional learning (SEL), and how augmenting social emotional learning skills can help to mitigate anxiety. Additionally, a 6-Week social emotional learning intervention addressing anxiety is included.

Keywords: anxiety, social emotional learning, intervention

Student Anxiety During COVID-19 Pandemic

Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, an unprecedented number of students are struggling with anxiety. Anxiety is defined as a feeling of worry or unease about an uncertain outcome (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Students struggling with anxiety may or may not be able to express the cause of their fears, which can lead to further angst. The COVID-19 Pandemic has caused an exorbitant amount of stress for students and their parents, which exacerbates students' anxiety. Social distancing, remote learning, not wanting to fall behind academically, loneliness, worrying about parents and family members, missing peers and instructors at school, as well as fear about if and when things will return to 'normal' have all caused a paralyzing level of anxiety amongst all. This can be especially difficult for children, as they do not have the same ability to comprehend and cope with the devastating impact of this pandemic. Anxiety can have a detrimental impact on students' academically, personally / socially, and emotionally, as well as impede upon students' abilities to reach their fullest potential.

Causes of Student Anxiety

According to the Centers for Disease, Control, and Prevention (CDC), mental health disorders have a profound impact on the way children learn, behave, and deal with emotions (CDC, 2020). Approximately 4.4 million children ages 3-17 struggle with anxiety or excessive worry (CDC, 2020). 7% of children ages 6-11 struggle with anxiety (CDC, 2020) for a myriad of reasons including schoolwork, grades, friends, family, how well they are doing, news and the media, fear of certain situations, worry about the future, loneliness, or lack of support.

Symptoms and Consequences of Anxiety

Students who are experiencing anxiety may feel frustrated or angry because they are unable to express the deep-rooted cause of their excessive worry. Many students may experience psychological symptoms including worry, having difficulty concentrating, difficulty remembering things, face attention problems, avoid tasks, speak quickly, appear withdrawn, or fail to complete important tasks. Students may also experience an array of uncomfortable physical symptoms including sweating, headaches, stomachaches, sleeping problems, heart pounding, difficulty breathing, or dizziness (Centers for Disease, Control, and Prevention, 2020).

Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning (SEL) is defined as the process by which children and adults regulate emotions, set goals, show empathy, build and maintain healthy relationships, and make constructive choices (CASEL, 2019). Beyond academic performance, children must possess specific social emotional learning skills in order to be able to overcome challenges and be prepared for future endeavors. Children who possess social emotional learn skills experience enhanced social interaction, have a greater ability to resolve problems, and are more motivated to accomplish certain tasks (Committee for Children, 2018). Social emotional learning skills help children to better manage their daily lives in regard to making healthy decisions and maintaining control over their emotions (Committee for Children, 2020). There are five core competencies that play an instrumental role in social emotional learning including:

Self-Awareness: One's ability to understand their emotions and thoughts and how these influence behaviors. Seeing ourselves the way others see us and having an accurate self-perception (CASEL, 2019).

Self-Management: Being able to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in order to achieve goals. This involves being proactive rather than reactive and to think about consequences before acting (CASEL, 2019)

Social Awareness: Being able to see perspectives of others including those from different backgrounds and cultures. Demonstrating open-mindedness and flexibility, as well as working to recognize strengths in others. This also includes demonstrating concern for others, as well as expressing gratitude and appreciation (CASEL, 2019).

Relationship Skills: Building and maintaining healthy relationships with different people. Being able to communicate clearly, develop healthy relationships, demonstrate cultural competency, display leadership, resolve conflicts, and asserting oneself (CASEL, 2019).

Responsible Decision Making: The ability to make healthy choices about personal behavior and social interactions in different situations. This includes thinking about consequences of one's actions, utilizing critical thinking, engaging in reflective practice, and demonstrating accountability (CASEL, 2019).

Social Emotional Learning and Anxiety

In addition to eating healthy, engaging in physical activity, getting the recommended amount of sleep, practicing, mindfulness and relaxation techniques, imagery, and journaling it is paramount for students to learn and build social emotional

learning skills in order to better cope with anxiety. If students lack coping skills, this can negatively impact their long-term performance (Gunn, 2020). As feelings related to anxiety can be very distressing, teaching and helping students to augment their social emotional learning skills is critical for their academic and emotional well-being. There are a variety of intrapersonal and interpersonal SEL skills that are significant for students to possess.

Intrapersonal skills are those that occur within one's mind and enables them to engage in reflective practice; identifying strengths and areas for growth. They refer to ways of dealing with oneself, one's thoughts, possessing awareness, beliefs, and abilities to facilitate change. Some of these skills include **adaptability** (being flexible in a situation), **self-regulation** (controlling impulses), having a **growth mindset** (recognizing that knowledge and skills are not fluid and can be enhanced via practice), **optimism** (having a positive mindset), **leadership** (being able to delegate tasks and being a visionary), **stress management** (being able to manage stress), **resilience** (ability to overcome adversity), and **character** (a set of values that enables people to demonstrate empathy, respect, and responsibility (CASEL, 2020).

Interpersonal skills are skills, knowledge, and attitudes directed towards other people (CASEL, 2020). Interpersonal skills include **empathy** (experiencing emotions others' feel and putting oneself in another's shoes), **social awareness** (being open-minded to others' perspectives and celebrating diversity), **collaboration** (working together as a team), **conflict resolution** (working together to problem solve in an efficient manner), **communication and active listening** (talking to, listening, validating, and understanding what oneself and others are saying verbally and non-verbally),

accountability (taking ownership and responsibility for one's actions), (CASEL, 2020), and **motivation** (inspiring self and others to achieve goals (Committee for Children, 2019).

Although anxiety will not necessarily be eradicated, SEL will allow one to co-exist and manage rather than being controlled and overpowered be anxiety. Therefore, in order to help students to regain control and experience resilience, school counselors are strongly encouraged to integrate social emotional learning into their comprehensive counseling program. Incorporating SEL will help counselors to provide support, promote knowledge and wisdom, as well as increase students' abilities and competency, leading to academic, personal / social, emotional, and vocational success for all.

ASCA Model: Responsive Services

According to the American School Counseling Association Model (ASCA, 2019), one of the critical aspects of being an elementary school counselor is implementing responsive services in order to meet the needs of students. In regard to program delivery, direct student services include developing a core curricula that enables students to achieve competencies, individual student planning to help students reach their academic goals, as well as responsive services including classroom, small group, or individual counseling in order to meet the immediate and pressing needs of students. Counselors also engage in indirect student services including collaboration, consultation, and referrals. This is critical, as counselors must collaborate with teachers and parents to identify students who may be struggling academically, socially, or emotionally so that they can reach out to, work with, and provide support to struggling

students. If students need additional interventions, school counselors can provide referrals to counselors outside of the school setting for further assistance.

<p style="text-align:center">Anxiety: 6 Week SEL Intervention</p>

Elementary school counselors spend the majority of time directly working with students (ASCA, 2019). Counselors focus their school counseling program based upon data and use data (attendance, grades, referrals) to meet the individual needs of students. Elementary school counselors have many responsibilities including providing support to students by addressing academic, career, and social emotional development. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to insurmountable increases in students struggling with various mental health issues, including anxiety. In an effort to assist students and counselors, below is a 6-Week SEL intervention focusing on anxiety and best practices used to mitigate anxiety amongst children.

<p style="text-align:center">Week 1</p>

Topic: Overview of Anxiety

1. **Define Anxiety**: Feeling of worry or fear about an uncertain outcome

2. **Discussion Questions**

   - What are some words that describe anxiety?

   - How do you feel when you become anxious?

   - What is ONE strategy that you have used to help you reduce your anxiety?

Evidence Based Practice: Students will complete the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED) assessment in order to obtain a baseline assessment as to the degree to which they experience anxiety

Creative Activity:

- Students will individually draw what anxiety looks like to them using colors, shapes, and images that represent anxiety

- Students will also 'name' anxiety in order to separate person from problem.

- Students will then write down THREE ways in which anxiety has impacted them personally / academically

- In a round robin setting, students will process their responses in a large group

Week 2

Topic: Stress and Worry

1. **Define Stress and Worry: Stress** is mental or emotional strain due to challenging circumstances / situations. **Worry** is having feelings of unease, fear, or anxiety and one is unable to stop thinking about a difficult situation

Discussion Questions:

- What do the words stress and worry mean to you?

- How do you feel when experiencing stress or worry?

- What causes you to feel stress or worried?

- Discuss ONE strategy you have used to calm down when feeling stressed or worried?

Evidence Based Practice:

- **EBP # 1:** Using an empty chair technique, students will talk to the chair as a way to release stress and worry. Students will tell the chair what makes them worried, as well as tell the chair that they are in control and want to stop feeling worried / fearful

- **EBP # 2**: Counselors can also use **scaling questions** in order to assess the degree to which a student is experiencing stress or worry.

  a. Counselors can ask, 'On a scale from one to five (1 being lowest and 5 being highest) indicate how stress or worried you are feeling….' If a student circles a 4, counselors can ask, 'What would need to happen in order to move to a 3 so your stress can be reduced?'

Creative Activity:

- **Creative Activity # 1**: Students can create a **worry stone** using play-doh. Students can mold play-doh into the shape of a stone. On their 'stone' they can make a thumb imprint. If student is feeling worried or anxious, they can use their worry stone at their desk or at home by moving their thumb back and forth over the stone. This can help promote relaxation and stress reduction.

- **Creative Activity # 2**: Each student can record a fear anonymously. The counselor can then read each of the student's fears out loud. After the counselor reads a fear out loud, the students can share how they would feel and how they would cope if they experienced that fear. This will allow for self-disclosure, empathy building, as well as perspective sharing.

- **Creative Activity # 3**: Students can create lavender scented stress balls. Students can fill balloons with flour and lavender scented oil. Once their balloon is full, using a Sharpie marker, students can draw emoticons on their stress ball that represent peace and calmness. Students can use their stress ball at their desk or at home when feeling overwhelmed

Week 3

Topic: Mindfulness

Define Mindfulness: The state of being aware of something, being present, being focused and feeling grounded

Discussion Questions

- What is the importance of mindfulness when feeling anxious?

- In what ways does deep breathing allow us to feel calmer?

- What are some things that you can visualize that help you to feel more relaxed?

Evidence Based Practice: Students will complete a guided meditation activity

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aX9PUQcdQ2U&t=69s

Upon completion, debrief the following in a large group:

- In what ways did this activity help you to feel centered?

- How has your worry or anxiety been reduced after completing this guided meditation?

- What is ONE way that you can relax when feeling anxious?

Creative Activity:

- **Creative Activity # 1:** Students can create a Coping Cup. Students can use a plastic cup. Using different colored Sharpie marker, students can write on the cup words or images that represent calmness and relaxation. On popsicle sticks, the counselor can assist students in writing down different ways to cope when feeling anxious. Each popsicle stick should have an individual coping skill. This will be a wonderful resource for students to use, as they will have multiple stress relieving and coping strategies to choose from when feeling stressed

- **Creative Activity # 2:** Students can draw their happy place. Ask students to close their eyes for 30 seconds and to envision what their happy place looks like, smells like, feels like. Students can then use different colors, images, or shapes to showcase their happy place on paper. Upon completion, encourage students to visualize their happy place in their mind's eye when experiencing anxiety or stress

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Week 4

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Topic: Control

Define Control: To feel confident and capable when in a stressful situation. Being in control allows us to feel strong and empowered

Discussion Questions:

- How do you feel when you are in control?

- What is the importance of feeling in control?

- In what ways does feeling in control allow us to reduce our anxiety or worry?

Evidence Based Practice:

- **Evidence Based Practice # 1:** Students will **Freeze Dance**! Counselors will play music. When the music stops, students will be asked to freeze. Doing this will show them that they have the ability to control their movements (as well as control other aspects of their lives).

- **Evidence Based Practice # 2: Exception Finding Question**: Has there been a time when you have felt in control? What was that like for you? In what ways can you use that previous experience to feel more in control now?

Creative Activity: Students will complete the '**Superhero Me'** Activity

- Students will draw themselves as a superhero

- Students will record their superhero mantra (a message they say to themselves to feel like a courageous and in control superhero)

- Students will record their superpower

- Students will indicate **THREE** things they can control, **THREE** things they cannot control, and **THREE** steps that they can take to enhance control over things they can change

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Week 5

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Topic: **Positive Self-Talk and Optimism**

Define Positive Self-talk and Optimism: Positive Self Talk is engaging in speech that is compassionate and showcases one's strengths. It involves saying kind and uplifting statements to oneself. **Optimism** is hopefulness and confidence about the future. It means staying positive and believing something successful will happen

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways is it important to use positive self-talk?

- What is the significance of being optimistic?

- How does using positive self-talk help us to be more optimistic?

- What are some things that we can do to be more hopeful?

Evidence Based Practice: Students will sit in a circular formation. Using a handheld mirror, students will look into the mirror and say THREE positive affirmations to themselves based upon strengths. Ex. 'I am brave' 'I am smart' 'I am caring'. Saying

positive affirmations helps to enhance self-worth, optimism, and enhances positive self-talk

Creative Activity # 1: Students will complete the **Worry Monster / Happy Monster** Activity

- Students will draw an image of a worry monster

- Students will use colors and images that reflect worry / fear

- Underneath the image of their worry monster, students will write down **THREE** negative statements that they say to themselves that cause anxiety

- On the other side of the paper, students will draw an image of happy monster

- Students will use colors and images that reflect happiness / peace

- Underneath the image of their happy monster, students will write down **THREE** positive reframes for each of the negative statements that trigger anxiety

  - Negative Statement Triggering Anxiety: I will never be able to do this

  - Positive Reframe: I cannot do this **yet**, but if I keep trying, I will improve

Week 6

Topic: Empowerment

Define Empowerment: Feeling strong, confident, and in control of one's choices

Discussion Questions:

- What is the importance of feeling empowered?

- How does being empowered allow us to feel in control?

- Discuss a time when you have felt empowered…

- What is **ONE** thing you can do to feel more empowered and in control?

Evidence Based Practice: Students will complete **POOF Magic Wand** Activity

Magic Wand: https://www.amazon.com/AnFun-Inches-Silver-Fairy-Princess/dp/B07Q32QKBJ/ref=sr_1_10?dchild=1&keywords=magic+wand+for+kids&qid=1608221331&sr=8-10

- Students will sit in a circular formation

- Students will go around the circle each holding a magic wand

- Students will close their eyes holding the magic wand and will share how their lives would be different if their anxiety disappeared

    - **If my anxiety magically disappeared, my life would be….**

- Each student will also share ONE strategy that they have learned from the group that they can use to reduce and manage their anxiety

Creative Activity: Students will complete the **Anxiety Free Me** Activity

- Students will draw a caricature representing their worry-free selves celebrating life

- Students will use shapes, images, and colors that reflect relaxation and peace

- Underneath their drawing, students will write down positive traits / inner resources that they possess that will enable them to take control of and reduce their anxiety

Discussion

Anxiety has a detrimental impact on students' overall wellness mentally, emotionally, and physically. Anxiety can prevent students from focusing and concentrating, can instill debilitating fears, as well as prevent students from working to their fullest potential, as they are unable to focus on and complete the task at hand.

Social emotional learning is imperative, as it provides students with the skills, competencies, and abilities to better control and cope with their anxiety. It is vital for counselors to integrate SEL into their counseling curricula so that students can learn and master these life skills necessary for success academically and vocationally. Students who have leadership abilities, are able to manage their fears, worries, time, and stress, able to communicate their feelings, cope with their emotions, problem solve, regulate their emotions, demonstrate empathy, accountability, and demonstrate optimism are more equipped to handle life's stressors, adversity, remain positive and hopeful, and continuously work towards bettering themselves and others around them. Students who possess SEL skills are better able to communicate their emotions, express themselves in a healthy manner, and have the ability to deal with uncomfortable feelings without being dictated and consumed by them. In turn, these students experience enhanced control, reduced anxiety, feeling centered, grounded, and better able to process feelings of worry and fear. Counselors are encouraged to facilitate individual, small group, and classroom counseling addressing SEL topics in order to promote an inclusive and proactive culture that embodies readiness and preparedness. It is especially important for school counselors to work with students struggling with anxiety either individually or in a small group setting, in order to educate, provide additional support and resources, enhance knowledge, as well as address best practices that students' can use to help them mitigate their anxiety.

Conclusion

As a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, millions of Americans including children, teens, and adults, are actively struggling with anxiety. Anxiety can be even

more challenging to address with children, due to underdeveloped coping skills, inability to fully communicate feelings, or lacking complete awareness of circumstances. Fear of the future, fear of not being able to return to 'normal', fear of loss, fear of isolation, lack of engagement and connectivity, fear of not reaching one's academic goals, sadness about not being in school, loss of interaction, loss of hope, and fear of the unknown. All of these fears have led to an exorbitant increase in anxiety; especially amongst children. Integrating SEL both at school and at home can help students better manage their anxiety, as they will learn strategies, tools, and coping skills that will enable them to feel more empowered, optimistic, in control, and motivated. Although the pandemic has taken away many liberties, school counselors and critical stakeholders must work together to provide consistency, safety, support, comfort, and reassurance that despite the current hardships, their students and children will survive, thrive, and go on to achieve greatness. If nothing else, the silver lining in this pandemic is that regardless of adversity, counselors and stakeholders have the awesome responsibility and ability to teach and demonstrate empathy, compassion, kindness, understanding, and perhaps most importantly, resilience. We must teach students to rise above and keep moving forward in order to continue towards self-actualization. Being resilient allows students to face and overcome fears, anxiety, and difficulties with bravery, confidence, and grace. Through addressing, teaching, and discussing SEL in order to combat anxiety, counselors and stakeholders can work together to normalize angst, reduce isolation, and create a learning environment (virtual or traditional) that encompasses calmness, stability, serenity, control, empowerment, love, and light.

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