

Using Plans to Overcome Anxiety

Some children feel very anxious when they approach a new situation, and they are not sure what to do. Anxiety is a very common emotion for anyone, especially children, and it can be particularly strong if a child does not have a *plan* for how to handle a situation. Many times children who do not have a good plan may avoid the situation. Sometimes they may become very fearful, or they may actually have real physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches. The more the situation is avoided, the more likely children will withdraw when anxious. Although withdrawal can make children less anxious, it is not a good long-term solution. Children who are very anxious in new situations may lack a good plan for what to do. To stop this cycle, their anxiety needs to be recognized, and they need to be taught how they can plan for a situation.

How to Use Plans to Overcome Anxiety

Follow these steps to help anxious children use plans to reduce their anxiety:

1. *Recognize anxiety.* First, adults working with children need to recognize which students' anxiety is interfering with the ability to be successful. Sometimes it may be obvious because a child says he or she is scared, hides, or cries in response to a difficult task. In other cases, anxious children hide their anxiety by avoiding activities, acting tough, or saying they do not care. Watching for these signs and recognizing that they may indicate anxiety is the first step.
2. *Determine how a plan might help.* Once it is recognized that a child is anxious about something, look to determine how a plan could help. Try to determine what part of the situation is causing the anxiety. For instance, a student trying out for a new sport may be comfortable talking to peers but may be anxious about what to do. Conversely, a student meeting new people may be comfortable with what to do, but may not know what to talk about. Give the children some ideas of how they could respond in these situations.
3. *Develop a plan.* When it is clear what is making the child anxious, the next step is to make specific plans for how to handle it. This may include specifically figuring out what to do, where to go, or what to say. For instance, if a student is going to call to ask about a volunteer job, some specific plans should be made about whom to call, what questions to ask, and what information to provide. Plans can be written out, discussed, and/or memorized. Sometimes simply talking to a child before something is about to happen and giving the child some ideas for what to do is enough to reduce his or her anxiety.
4. *Practice the plan.* Often it is important to practice the plan. If a student has actually had a chance to do what makes him or her anxious, even if it is just role play, it can help reduce anxiety. For instance, if a student has to give a speech, the student can

plan out what to do and say and then practice it in front of a couple of friends or family who are supportive.

5. *Revise and/or add plans.* It is important that the child monitor the success of the plan. Sometimes after a plan has been used it becomes clear that the initial plan is not best. In this case, a new plan can be developed. In other cases, additional plans can be added. For example, if a student is going to be interviewed but does not know what the questions will be, he or she can come up with several plans for how to respond and practice them all.

Using Plans and Practice to Overcome Anxiety

All children can benefit from using plans and practice for situations that make them anxious. However, children weak in Planning often have particular trouble creating a plan for new and challenging situations, which in turn can create anxiety. In fact, some children low in Planning may first be identified as highly anxious even though that is not the cause of their difficulty. They need help planning!

Resource

Kline, F.M., & Silver, L.B. (Eds.). (2004). *The educator's guide to mental health issues in the classroom*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.