REFEREED ARTICLE

The Effects of Anxiety and Depression on a Student’s Emotional Growth, and Supports for Parents and Educators

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Abstract

Young students’ undetected anxiety and depressive symptoms may develop into bigger psychological issues in adulthood. Anxiety and depression are the leading contributors to childhood psychological illness (Finning et al., 2019). Students who are struggling emotionally may have difficulty achieving academic success. Schools and educators play a key role in helping to identify, and provide interventions for, students with anxiety and depression. Numerous programs and strategies are available for educators to use and to offer supports for parents, as well. It is important for educators, parents, and the community to work together to support the well-being of children in order to create a successful future.

Anxiety and depression can affect a child’s ability to become a productive and emotionally stable student. Students who internalize their problems are often overlooked and viewed as not needing supports (Neth et al., 2020). This may cause a student’s issues to develop into deeper emotional problems. Schools may use daily check-ins, and other programs such as Strong Kids, Response to Intervention (RTI), and hire additional mental health support staff to ensure that students have a safe place to share their emotions. Strong Kids focuses on teaching students coping skills, positive decision making, self-management, and maintaining relationships (Neth et al., 2020). RTI is “an alternative method for determining eligibility for special education and as a rationale for providing early intervention to children at risk for school failure” (Hierck & Weber, 2014 p. xiv). A student’s anxiety and depressive symptoms are sometimes under-identified due to inaccurate parental and educational staff observations. School-wide mental health screening assessments can help educators and parents to identify issues before they become symptomatic. Parenting dimensions also play a crucial role to a child’s self-esteem and psychological growth (Wouters et al., 2018). Schools should provide training to parents, such as through the Responsibility-Centered Parenting (RCP) program (Thompson et al., 2017). Providing incentives for parents to participate in the program, such as door prizes and providing dinner for meetings, gift cards, and prize baskets, may increase the success, as well. Children who internalize issues may develop emotional problems that may worsen as they transition into adulthood. It is the duty of educators to ensure that the adults in a child’s life work as a team to create a successful future for all. Researching, creating, and offering as many supports and programs as possible are key to children’s success in school.

Internalizing Emotions

Students who have anxiety and depressive symptoms are at risk for “educational failure, physical health problems, adult mental illness, substance abuse, and increased risk in suicide” (Finning et al., 2019, p. 187). As a child, I internalized my feelings and emotions out of fear. I struggled with anxiety and academic success throughout grade school. Students are often too embarrassed to share their experiences with others. Some children learn at a young age to internalize their issues out of fear, and they feel unsafe to share (Alec, 2020). Most schools provide interventions only to students who display disruptive behaviour. One of my students struggles with anxiety, and the parent reached out to the school for supports. I made a referral to the school psychologist, but the case load was too heavy to take on a new student. This student does not show disruptive behaviour, and therefore is not viewed as a priority for the
school year. This is not fair to students who internalize their problems (Finning et al., 2019). Anxiety and depressive symptoms do not go away on their own; it takes time, prevention, space, and extra supports to tackle these issues.

It would be helpful if schools train all teachers and offer small groups sessions for students who need emotional supports. Check-ins, parental involvement, and the Strong Kids program are a starting point for students to learn about anxiety and depressive symptoms, and how to navigate their emotions in a safe manner. Daily mental health check-ins should be at the top of an educator’s priority list; this will encourage students to feel comfortable and safe to express their emotions. Parents and caregivers should also be informed and offered information and training sessions to encourage using check-ins at home (Mitchell et al., 2021). Another effective program is RTI; this program is intended to provide supports to students as soon as they display academic or behaviour challenges (Hierck & Weber, 2014). The Strong Kids program at my school is taught by an outside Mental Health Facilitator once a week. The Strong Kids program is a “socio-emotional learning curriculum designed to reduce students’ internalizing symptoms” (Neth et al., 2020, p. 1). To build a successful community and make space for emotional concerns to prevent internalizing, it is important to make available mental health supports for students, staff, and parents who may need support.

Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms

Under-identification of anxiety and depressive symptoms in children can lead to emotional problems. Some parents may be too busy to have meaningful conversations with their children about emotional hardships. Detecting depression in children is hard, due to internalizing and lack of communication. It can take up to eight years for a major depressive disorder to develop if the first episode goes unnoticed (Gudmundsen et al., 2019). Without tackling the issues at an early age, the door is open for all sorts of failure in a child’s life. Parents and caregivers who are required to report on their child’s mental health condition, for school or counselling, may not have the skills to provide precise information (Gudmundsen et al., 2019). Therefore, anxiety and depressive symptoms at a young age are disregarded. These symptoms may lead to bigger issues, such as “absenteeism from school, inability to complete education, reduction of self-confidence, drug abuse, and anxiety disorders in adulthood” (Dehaghi et al., 2020, p. 25). It is often difficult for educators and parents to identify when a student is suffering emotionally, especially if there are outstanding assignments that need to be completed and there are other issues in the home.

When schools implement a school-wide mental health screening assessment for all students, they may be able to address students issues early. Parents would be involved in the assessment process. The assessments could take place three times a year, at the same time that report cards are distributed. It is important to keep a timeline of events that include traumatic events, death in the family, relationships loss, and anything that may cause a child to develop emotional concerns. Children spend several hours every weekday in school. Therefore, schools play a major role in identifying mental health issues in students (Burns & Rapee, 2019). Educators must incorporate time and resources to identify, support, and prevent the onset of anxiety and depressions symptoms. All education staff should be trained to monitor students who show such symptoms as fatigue, worrying, and change in appetite. Creating and incorporating health modules for each symptom may also be of benefit (Gudmundsen et al., 2019). Schools also need more external supports to implement interventions, such as hiring full-time mental health facilitators for each school and training all staff and parents (Eiraldi et al., 2019). Educators, parents, and the community should work as a team to ensure success in every child’s life. This may prevent future anxiety and depressive disorders.
Parenting Dimensions

Parenting dimensions can affect a child’s self-esteem, positive personal growth, and confidence to make decisions in life. Parents who are over-bearing and have psychological control over their child may create low self-esteem issues (Wouters et al., 2018). As a parent, I was guilty of being too over-bearing. This caused issues with my daughter’s confidence to make her own decisions. My daughter struggled with relationships, friendships, and deciding what route she wanted to take for university. Parents must be cautious about how they react to their child’s successes and failures (Wouters et al., 2018). This course has taught me to be more mindful of how I parent my adult-child and how I handle my students’ behaviours, as well. A parent’s reactions may have a negative impact on the child’s development and transition into school and extra-curricular activities (Wouters et al., 2018). They can also affect the teacher’s and classmates’ well-being. This may cause a student to be overly sensitive or to overreact when it comes to losing in school games and successfully completing assignments. Another issue that may affect a child’s emotional well-being is parental conflicts caused from separation. Some parents struggle with the separation, and the emotional well-being of the child may not be priority. Parental separation and lack of commitment may cause children to be unmotivated and to lack independence (Nusinovici et al., 2018). Parents play an important role in contributing to the positive development of their child’s self-worth, mental health, and educational success. Parents are a child’s first role model and leader; they must ensure they are mindful as they raise a child.

Schools can offer training and information sessions on RCP. This program helps parents guide their child through challenging issues by following these steps: support the child, provide clear expectations, breakdown the issue, discuss benefits of overcoming the issue, and closure (Thompson et al., 2017). In order to get a buy-in from parents, the schools could offer door prizes, incentives, snacks, and child-minding. Schools could also offer small-group meetings for parents to discuss their concerns and ideas, and support each other. It is also important to keep in mind that both parents and educators address their own emotional triggers prior to offering supports to their students and children (Thompson et al., 2017). Parents may need to learn about how to deal with their child’s challenges and they may not be aware that their parenting styles are damaging their child’s self-esteem. Parents must be careful with how they provide guidance and love to the child; too much and too little may confuse a child (Wouters et al. 2018). This is where the educators can support the child and the parents. It is important to support students and their parents, in a non-judgmental manner, and work as a team to build healthy relationships. If everyone is on the same page, this will improve the child’s education and success. The opportunities would be endless for both the child and parent.

Conclusion

Anxiety and depression are the leading contributors to childhood psychological illness (Finning et al., 2019). Students who internalize their problems are at a greater risk than the students who externalize their problems. Daily check-ins, the Strong Kids and Response to Intervention (RTI) programs, and having additional mental health support staff may ensure that students have a safe place to share their emotions. These strategies and programs are a starting point to help students talk about their emotions. Under-identification is caused by parents, caregivers, and educators who do not have the knowledge and resources to identify when a student is facing anxiety and depression (Gudmundsen et al., 2019). Using a school-wide screening assessment would be of benefit for educators and parents to support a child’s emotional challenges. Parenting styles can also greatly affect a child’s self-esteem and success in school (Wouters et al., 2019). Implementing the RCP program for students and parents would improve the relationships at home. Students who are struggling emotionally will not be capable
of learning or reaching their full potential until the issues are addressed. Those who are surrounded by students who suffer from anxiety and depressive symptoms may also be at risk for developing anxiety and mental health hardships. It is important for educators, parents, and the community to work together to support children’s well-being and to create a successful future.

References


About the Author

Trisha Wilson is in her 14th year as an educator. She is currently teaching grade six and she absolutely loves this grade. She is taking her M.Ed. in guidance and counselling. Her interests are attending cultural ceremonies, sundancing with her daughter, and playing on the Winnipeg Women’s Volleyball League.