

Calming Anxious Kids in the Classroom

Natural Ways to Address the Issue



There are many reasons why children and teens today struggle more with anxiety than previously. Parents live busier lives, the digital landscape is constantly exerting its influence and stealing precious moments of connection. There's a push-down of hurry and formalised learning, less outside play and movement.

Thanks to neuroscience and the science of child development, we now have more understanding than ever to help us raise children and teens who thrive. Dr Stuart Shanker, Dr Gordon Neufeld, Dr Daniel Siegel, Dr Tina Payne Bryson, Dr Vanessa Lapointe and Dr Mona Delahooke have all contributed enormously in these fields.

As parenting and education trends changed and moved further away from what children really need, especially in the early years, our children and teens have become wired to be hypersensitive.

Heightened levels of stress hormone cortisol mean we're seeing more students who feel threatened, unsafe, uncomfortable, frightened, worried and unable to cope.

Dr Stuart Shanker, a world-renowned researcher on self-regulation, writes extensively about his concerns for the declining mental and physical wellbeing of today's children. Stress impacts their ability to develop patterns of self-regulation whether it be physical, emotional, social or cognitive.

Contributors to stress in children can include:

- insufficient or poor sleep
- poor diet
- overstimulation & sensory overload especially from screens (Especially endless pinging notifications!)
- overanxious, stressed adults
- unrealistic and inappropriate expectations of children
- over-scheduled childhoods
- lack of physical movement
- less time spent in the natural world



Maggie Dent demonstrates the 'tickle spot,' a relaxation point high on the back, at her recent *Calming Today's Anxious Kids* conference in Melbourne.

- chaotic home environments with a lack of structure and routines
- lack of emotional and physical nurturing
- issues with friends/relationships
- economic stress on families

Children's anxiety levels can also be linked to neurodivergence, poor attachment, medical issues, trauma, sensory processing challenges, life changes and separation anxiety.

There are a lot of things on that list that you, as a teacher, cannot control.

So how can we support children who are struggling?

Relational connection.

Research is strong: The number one need for children is to feel safe. In the early years, building secondary attachment relationships is essential for helping children build those calming neural circuits. But it's just as important with older students, too.

Author of *Beyond Behaviours*, Canadian child psychologist, Mona Delahooke, writes that we need to focus not on what we do to kids, but "how we are with them."

That's not always easy to manage with a modern teacher's workload, but the calmer our homes and classrooms the better our children and teens cope. Essentially, we need to create the feel-good brain chemicals to override the stress-induced chemicals.

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Tips for Creating Serotonin in Classrooms

- Practice breathing exercises. Teach kids to take three deep breaths often to trigger the relaxation response or try 4-2-4 breathing.
- Teach them to tickle the tickle spot high up on each other's backs at the base of the neck - gently and slowly (and with consent).
- Use brain breaks and movement to release body tension.
- Have a calm-down bean bag or chair that looks out the window. Teachers can also take time to model needing some calm time.
- Try relaxation and mindfulness practises or audios. Smiling Mind has free content specifically for schools.
- Use quiet tonality when speaking or making requests. Have a silent visual signal you agree on when you want the class's attention.



- Use soothing, calming background music in class or uplifting music depending on the mood you want to create.
- Connect children to nature by spending time outside as often as you can.
- Try sensory activities like play dough, modelling clay, sandplay, finger painting, painting the back fence with water or blowing bubbles outside.
- Rocking and gentle swinging are also great natural calming activities so think hammocks or rocking chairs.
- Tap on the K 27 points on your chest (just under the collarbone) – it’s a natural release point for tension.

(Check Maggie Soothers videos on YouTube for demonstrations of a few of these.)

Ways to Create Dopamine:

Dopamine creates a switched-on, having fun, “I am really interested,” kind of state in the body. The biggest killers of dopamine are stress, boredom, fear or threat. Play (especially outside in the natural world) is the best way to create dopamine. Also:

Doing an activity the students enjoy. Ask for their input!

Having fascinating conversations or listening to a great story. Try paired sharing circles.

Exploring, fossicking or hunting for anything new.


Building or constructing something.

Putting on a play or a musical performance.

Playing or listening to music or melodic sounds.

Helping with cooking, even in a mud kitchen.

Lightening up -- Be silly, wear a wig, funny glasses, fake teeth or capes.

Finally, I would urge you to practise more patience, kindness and compassion – especially with yourself. 



Music, especially created with instruments that use a pentatonic scale such as UFO drums, can immediately shift the mood in a classroom. Image courtesy of Allison Davies.



Maggie Dent

Maggie Dent is one of Australia’s favourite parenting authors, educators and podcasters. Her latest book, *Help Me Help My Teen*, is out August 2024. She is also bringing her popular *Calming Today’s Anxious Kids* conference to Auckland, NZ, on 14th September.

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