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School Difficulties in Children and Adolescents:

How Parents Can Help

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Tips for Parents

If Your Child/Adolescent Has or Shows Signs of an Anxiety Disorder, Clinical Depression, AD/HD, or a Learning Disability:

- Children need to be evaluated because if they are identified, diagnosed, and treated early they can reach their full potential
- If persistent symptoms of anxiety, depression, or AD/HD occur the child may need to be referred to and evaluated by a mental health professional who specializes in treating children
- Often it is the teachers who may first notice anxiety (or depression or signs of AD/HD)
- Teachers or school counselors may encourage parents to have a student evaluated if they are observing attentional, emotional, or behavioral difficulties interfering with their performance
- Parent/family support is vital to their recovery

Tips for Parents of Children/Adolescents w/ a High Level of Anxiety or Depression

- When doing homework, help them do one question, or just a few problems at a time, use paper to cover up the rest of worksheet to decrease their being overwhelmed
- Relaxation/Deep Breathing/Progressive Muscle Relaxation
 - Teach the child to breathe deeply through their nose – several long, deep breaths in and out
 - You can also teach them to tense and relax muscles in their body while breathing deeply (progressive muscle relaxation)

- After addressing what they are anxious about, help them focus on something positive or safe when they feel worried or anxious
- Counter some of their irrational/ “stinky” thinking
 - Carefully/tactfully confront some of the beliefs they have that are irrational or not based on reality (e.g., “I’m going to fail that test.” “Nobody likes me.”)
 - Pointing out past successes in that area
 - For older, or more verbal/abstract children/adolescents - ask for the evidence that supports their irrational belief
 - Have them ask themselves, “Is it really as bad as I feel it is?” (e.g., a completed assignment where they think they did poorly)
 - “How do other people see it?” “What would (your friend’s name) think?”
 - “Have you ever heard of other students having that problem?”
- To help children/adolescents if perfectionistic:
 - Encourage them that their work does not need to be perfect
 - If self-critical, help them substitute more realistic, reasonable thoughts
 - Help them see the good parts or strengths of the what they do
 - Help them set realistic goals – if too high, may be setting themselves up for failure
 - Help them set strict time limits on their projects - when time is up, move on to another activity (to reduce procrastination that comes from perfectionism)
 - Teach them how to deal with criticism
 - If s/he stops making mistakes, they also stop learning & growing
 - Criticism is something to learn from rather than avoid
- Counselors at school can meet with them periodically, informally to provide coping skills, support, warmth, acceptance, and empathy for their feelings
- Offer them experiences for success
 - Especially important b/c depressed kids do not feel part of things and tend to overfocus on their failures and see failures more often, (can lead to more failures)
 - Individual, group activities
 - So they feel part of what’s going on, a sense of belonging, that they’re doing something important

- Give them simple tasks and reward with a lot of praise, encouragement, & attention – so they can feel special
 - E.g., set the table, help w/ cooking, help a parent do a job
- Increase as much positive feedback as possible about their work, activities
- Provide opportunities to exercise to help reduce their anxiety, depression, AD/HD symptoms
 - Physical activities are important because depression often reduces energy level, and exercise can increase energy and brain chemicals, as well as reduce anxiety and distractibility
- Support them - help them build a supportive network by reaching out to others
- Show them understanding and compassion but also hold them accountable
- Do not ignore remarks about suicide
- Do not accuse the depressed person of faking illness or of laziness, or expect him or her "to snap out of it."
- Eventually, with treatment, most people do get better. Keep that in mind, and keep reassuring the depressed person that, with time and help, he or she will feel better.

The Role of the School for Children or Adolescents Who May Have Clinical Anxiety, Depression, AD/HD, or Learning Disabilities

- Schools need to develop creative ways to ensure that all children feel connected to the school, teachers, and other adults in the community, as well as to their peers.
 - Make sure that every child feel safe and secure in school and on their way to and from school.
 - An emphasis on performance, grades, and standardized tests raises the level of anxiety in children and a time when the world is becoming more threatening place.
- Some children with anxiety disorders or clinical depression need school accommodations
- To get special accommodations or curriculum modifications:
 - The child must be evaluated by a qualified professional and receive a diagnosis, which must be interfering with their academic functioning
 - In most situations, the school cannot provide special accommodations or any extra assistance without this information

- It is important to weigh the concern of them being “labeled” against them failing or not living up to their potential if they need accommodations
 - While a student’s self-concept may diminish with the knowledge that they are labeled or the feeling of being singled out, it also may diminish if they continue to be unsuccessful or struggle in school
- Examples of school accommodations:
 - Taking exams in a distraction free environment
 - Receiving extra time on exams or assignments utilizing reading, writing, or math
 - Allowing preferential seating (i.e. near the teacher, away from high traffic)
 - Using extra credit for students with test anxiety
 - Providing teacher notes to use during lectures
 - Presenting information in smaller chunks and allowing for a great deal of repetition on instructions (rereading and rephrasing tasks)
 - Permitting frequent breaks as needed
 - Assisting with organizational skills
 - Providing word banks of essential vocabulary for reference
 - Allowing access to services that will improve academic skills (e.g., use of a laptop computer or word processing program for writing if needed)