



Key
Ministry

There's this kid... Anxiety

(for children up to 12 years old)



The situation: A new family has visited your church the last two Sundays, and 9-year old daughter Grace had a meltdown both times after her parents dropped her off in her Sunday School classroom. Grace attends a local Christian school, as do several of the students in the Sunday School class.

Each time Grace's mother apologized profusely for Grace's behavior, and forced Grace to take your classroom assistant's hand before beating a hasty departure. Both you and the assistant welcomed Grace warmly each Sunday, but so far, she hasn't spoken a word. At the end of class time, she was the first one out the door. Two girls who go to the same school as Grace were seen giggling when Grace's mother forced Grace to hold your assistant's hand.



What is Anxiety?

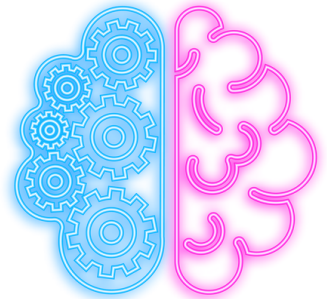
All people experience feeling anxious from time to time, but anxiety disorders are a group of related conditions with one thing in common: persistent, excessive fear or worry in situations that are not threatening. About 7% of kids ages 3-17 have anxiety disorders.

Source: NAMI.org

What's Happening Inside Grace's Brain?

When Grace encounters an unfamiliar situation, her "thinking brain" (left side) recognizes what she believes is a threat, which tells her "emotional brain" (right side) that it's time for fight, flight or freeze. No matter what her left-side logic will say, she is overwhelmed by the right-side emotional activity and can't distance herself from what she's feeling. When Grace is anxious, her "thinking brain" is basically offline. Reasoning with her won't help, because logical thought happens in the thinking brain.

<https://www.heysigmund.com/dealing-with-anxiety-in-children-calm-anxious-brain/>



Isn't Grace Just Misbehaving? How to Spot Anxiety vs. Misbehavior.

The difference between occasional anxiety versus anxiety disorder has to do with duration, intensity, and impact.

Grace's mother stated in the children's ministry intake form that she has persistent fears in new situations (duration). When your classroom assistant asked about Grace's fears, her mother noted that on the first few days of school each year, it is common for Grace to visit the school nurse complaining of headaches and feeling shaky (intensity and impact). She also noted that Grace does not make new friends easily and hopes Grace can make a friend in the church (impact).

In children, anxiety can look like...



- frequent stomachaches
- headaches
- being overly clingy with parents when no longer age-appropriate, or even having tantrums
- refusing to go to school or other activities

- misbehaving at home, school or in other environments to avoid certain activities or events

Fact: Kids with anxiety overestimate the risk of new situations. Kids like Grace fear the unfamiliarity of new situations and how to behave in them.

DID YOU KNOW?



Your goal is to allow each child to be comfortable enough in your classroom to absorb gospel truths.

Suggestions for Classrooms

neutral colored walls || neutral decorations
|| good signage to classrooms and worship center || visual schedule in classroom

**Universal Design =
what works for one works for all!**

Best Practice Tips

With or Without a Diagnosis

- Don't make kids read out loud or call on kids for class participation unless they volunteer.
- Remember that not all children and adults who are anxious will have a diagnosed mental health challenge.
- Think of observed mental health behavioral challenges as a person who wants to do well, but is struggling in your environment.

Plan for Your Sunday School Class with Anxiety in Mind

- Offer to meet new families on a weekday when the church is quiet so they can grow comfortable with the church environment (or in their home so they can be comfortable with you!)
- Have parents complete an intake form to learn what helps that student connect to others
- Be cautious about praising students in front of the class until you know their comfort level
- Give students like Grace...grace!



Help Grace grow in her relationship with Jesus...

1. Encourage Grace's mother to bring Grace to the church midweek or before activities begin so she can become more comfortable in your classroom.
2. If Grace connects with a student in your ministry, ask the other family to connect with Grace's family outside of church activities.
3. Connect Grace's family with family ambassadors within your church, even if the children are not the same ages.
4. Scripture memory verses and lessons: select verses focused on God always being with you. Reinforce with lessons about how God was with people in the Bible, Jesus' promises to always be with His disciples, and examples of how God has been with you and other people in the church.
5. Learn about Grace's gifts and interests, and allow her to use these to serve the church.
6. Provide "homework" for older children and teens to reinforce what was taught and to increase familiarity and connection to the Church.
7. Share specific Scripture.

Volunteers to recruit for children's ministry:

- Mature Christians who can foster spiritual growth and maturity
- Special education teachers
- School counselors
- Psychologists
- Parents with adult kids with anxiety
- Adults who have experienced anxiety
- Grandparents of a child with anxiety



We who are strong in the faith ought to help the weak to carry their burdens. We should not please ourselves. Instead, we should all please other believers for their own good, in order to build them up in the faith.

Romans 15:1-2 GNT



I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. - Philippians 4:13

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