

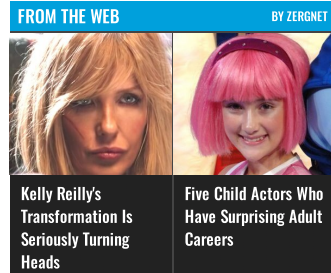


TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM RESOURCES

Using Social Emotional Learning to Alleviate Back-to-School Anxiety

By Jennifer Gunn

[Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Pinterest](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Email](#)



The start of the school year can trigger some serious anxiety for students – *and* teachers. Through the use of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies, educators can help students cope with back-to-school anxiety to truly thrive in class. Here's how to recognize the signs of student distress and ways to guide students through anxiety. And, these technique can definitely work for educators so that we can calm our own classroom anxieties too!

What is SEL?

According to [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#), "social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." SEL can be seamlessly integrated into a school's culture and norms or it can be explicitly taught outside of academic learning time.

Read more about [bringing SEL into the classroom](#) and [why we need SEL now](#).

Understanding anxiety

"From time to time, all individuals experience varying degrees of anxiety, fears, and worries. Anxiety is a normal experience that typically reflects anticipation about events that might have a negative outcome," according to Kim Killu and R.

About “half of students diagnosed with an anxiety disorder experience significant difficulty functioning at school. Anxiety lowers academic performance and productivity, although students with mild levels of anxiety can sometimes compensate using persistence and hard work,” says A.P. Wagner in [Worried No More: Help and Hope for Anxious Children](#). “Tardiness, absenteeism, and perfectionism, common with more severe levels of anxiety, can lead to incomplete work, test failure, or possible repetition of a grade.”

Whether you’re working with kindergartners starting school for the very first time or experienced students returning to high school, each new school year can trigger feelings of anxiety. While new-school-year anxiety feelings rooted in things like anticipation or uncertainty may not be part of a full-on, generalized anxiety disorder, these emotions can still be distressing.

Children and adolescents can start to feel anxiety during the summer as the new school year approaches. They may have worries such as: Will I like my teacher? Where are my classes? Will I know anyone? What if no one likes me? What if I get scared? What if I’m bullied? Although anxiety and school can go hand-in-hand for some students, there are many ways we can help our students.

What teachers can do

Say hello before the school year starts

A great way to demystify the new year is to introduce yourself before school starts. Write a welcome letter directly to your students and send it to them at home. Include a photo of yourself and one of the classroom to alleviate anticipatory anxiety. Doing so also provides context and a familiar face for students to look for when they arrive at school. While this may seem labor-intensive, you only need to write one letter to send to all of your students, and this labor of postal love will go a long way in reducing anxiety for your incoming learners. It can also make the first few days a lot less stressful.

Know the symptoms

Some students, especially younger ones, may wear their school anxiety on their sleeve. They may come to class crying, feeling terrified of being separated from their family and operating independently in a new environment. But educators should also look for students who isolate themselves, appear irritable, refuse to eat, seem extra tired, have trouble concentrating, or who display nervous behaviors like nail-biting or fidgeting.

“It’s common for kids to avoid talking about how they feel because they’re worried that others (especially their parents) might not understand. They may fear being judged or considered weak, scared, or “babyish,” according to [KidsHealth](#). “This leads many kids to feel alone or misunderstood.” Recognize the signs. Let your students know that it’s okay to be nervous and that you are there to support them.

Try using worry stones

[Worry stones](#) are oval-shaped, polished stones with a thumbprint indentation. When students feel anxious, encourage them to rub their thumb across the stone as they take a deep breath. This method of self-soothing is a form of cognitive behavioral therapy. Over time, it becomes a habitual practice to self-calm and shift one’s concentration away from worry. Teachers can give anxious students — or all students — a stone to hold for a day or the first week of school.

Get grounded

Grounding is a technique that helps divert the brain away from the spiral of anxious thoughts back into the present moment. Chicago’s [Dr. Sarah Allen](#), a clinical psychologist, notes that “When we start to think about something stressful, our amygdala, a section of the brain located in the temporal lobe, goes into action. The amygdala, simply put, is the part of our brain that is responsible for our emotional responses, especially fear. It is great for preparing for emergency events, but sometimes it kicks into action and detects a threat where there really isn’t any.”

Grounding techniques, she argues, help us break out of this “vicious cycle” of anxiety by re-focusing on what’s around us through our senses. The 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique is a popular one that can be used with children and young



For each part of this activity, students can say or write down what they see, feel, hear, smell, or taste.

5 – SEE: Have students look around for 5 things they can **see**, and state what those are.

4 – FEEL: Ask students to list off 4 things they can **feel**.

3 – HEAR: Students should listen for 3 sounds they can **hear** and say what those sounds are.

2 – SMELL: Tell students to identify 2 things they can **smell**.

1 – TASTE: Ask students to state 1 thing they can **taste** or want to taste and say it out loud.

Finish by taking a deep, cleansing breath.

Let your worries go with the Worry Jar

The Worry Jar is an activity that helps students mindfully identify their worries and give themselves permission to shift their focus away from them for a while. "It is like storing them for safe keeping," says clinical psychologist [Dr. Stephanie Margolese](#). "Just knowing that their worries are contained in the jar can free your child from having to replay them in their minds." Ask students to write down their worries and anxieties on a piece of paper. If they're too young to write, students can tell you their worries and you can write them down. It helps if the teacher plays along as well by writing down their own worries. Next, have students fold up their paper and put it in the jar while saying: "I can let this worry go for now." Store the worry jar out of sight. If you'd like to give students a space to express their anxieties, you can also schedule "Weather Report" or "Status Update" times when students are encouraged to share their worries in writing or out loud as a classroom family. Sharing anxieties can help students see that their peers may be feeling many of the same things and it can [build empathy amongst classmates](#).

Read more about Social Emotional Learning: [The Magic of Circle Talk](#)

Teach mindfulness with the Squeeze & Release muscle technique

Ask students to lie down or sit comfortably. Turn on some calming music, and guide students to squeeze and then relax each muscle in their body, one at a time, from their head to their toes. With each release, have students exhale a nice big breath. The teacher should verbally guide students through each section, head to toe, and then ask them to squeeze their entire body and let go with a final deep breath. This calming exercise helps student maintain focus on their mind and body while slowing down the nervous system. Encourage students to use this technique whenever they feel worry creeping in or if they can't sleep.

Check out our [mindfulness activities for elementary classrooms](#).

Teacher tools to test out

The Calm Schools Initiative

[Calm.com](#) is giving its mindfulness training tools to every teacher in the world – for free. Simply sign up and any teacher with a K-12 classroom will get free access to Calm's paid subscription service content. "Teachers will have unlimited access to our growing library of guided meditations and mindfulness exercises, including Calm Kids, our programs tailored for age groups from pre-K through high school."

Back-to-school anxiety resources

For young learners

- Everybody Feels Scared
- First Day Jitters
- Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come and in Spanish: Prepare, Kindergarten! Alla Voy!
- Outsmarting Worry: An Older Kid's Guide to Managing Anxiety

- [The Anxiety Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal with Anxiety and Worry](#)
- [Everyday SEL in Middle School: Integrating Social-Emotional Learning and Mindfulness Into Your Classroom](#)
- [Be Mindful Card Deck for Teens](#)
- [The Mindful Teen: Powerful Skills to Help You Handle Stress One Moment at a Time](#)

Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, teaching coach, and high school educator in New York City. She is also cofounder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation, and regularly presents at conferences on the topics of adolescent literacy, leadership, and education innovation.

You may also like to read

[Useful Counseling Activities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning](#)

[Cooperative Learning for Middle School Math Class](#)

[Bringing Social-Emotional Learning into the Classroom](#)

[Teacher Resources for Social-Emotional Development in Children](#)

[The Real and Lasting Impacts of Social-Emotional Learning with At-Risk](#)

[Social-Emotional Learning: The Magic of Circle Talk](#)

Tags: Back to School Season, Early Childhood and Elementary (Grades: PreK-5), High School (Grades: 9-12), Middle School (Grades: 6-8), Trauma and Resilience

Also of Interest:

[Master's in Trauma Education and Trauma-Informed Care](#)

[Teacher Resources for Social-Emotional...](#)

[COVID-19: Resilient](#)