

Fears Triggered by School Occurrences and Classroom Events

The Fear of Speaking

Snakes may rank first, but the fear of speaking seems to consistently rank at the top of lists when people are asked what they fear most (Top7Business.com, 2009). Fear may be characterized as a “feeling of alarm or dread caused by the expectation of danger, pain, or disaster” (Top7Business.com, 2009). We often fear looking foolish in front of others. We fear that we may “draw a blank”, stumble while approaching our speaking position, or not present effectively, causing others to laugh or think less of us. Concentrating is often difficult; our heart may beat faster, our mouth may become dry or we may begin to feel light headed and sick to our

stomach. Sometimes we become so nervous that when we do begin to speak, we hurry through our presentation, speaking rapidly or stumbling over words.

Just like adults, many students experience this same fear and exhibit these same worries. Teachers often ease into isolated speaking requests by asking student groups to present. Individual students feel less threatened because they are surrounded by peers. Instead of feeling like all eyes are on them, students feel the pressure is shared, creating a safety blanket.

Educators can begin easing the fear of speaking



“An interesting trick is to practice a speech while standing in the corner. The sound reflects back to you, giving you a good idea of how you will sound when you speak.”
(School for Champions, 2009)

by helping students prepare. The following suggestions lead to successful presentations, build self-confidence and aid in the personal growth of students.

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Special points of interest:

- ◆ Suggestions that lead to successful presentations.
- ◆ Validating fears.
- ◆ The most common fears identified.
- ◆ When perfectionism becomes the focus.
- ◆ Test taking anxiety.
- ◆ The need to fit in and be accepted.

Back to School Jitters

A new academic year or a new school can trigger a feeling of uncertainty. Here are some great ice breakers for the beginning of the school year to help create a comfortable environment.

*Ask students to share a story from a previous school year. As students share entertaining or touching stories, relationships will begin to

develop.

*Teachers should clearly articulate classroom expectations, including assignment schedules, breaks, available tutoring, and grading policies.

*Ask students to write at least three goals they hope to accomplish within the school year. When finished, fold the pieces of paper and place them in a secure loca-

tion. Towards the end of the year, ask students to evaluate their accomplishments by revisiting the goals they set nine months ago.

*For new students especially, a tour can offer comfort. Walk to the gym, library, computer room, nurse’s office, main office and other places students will be expected to visit.

The Fear of Speaking (continued)

Prepare: Every aspect of a presentation must be planned ahead of time. Students must know who they are speaking to and have ample time to practice and gather materials. A presentation does not need to be memorized, but students must understand that notes or a guideline is expected. An outline maintains focus and reduces the anxiety of forgetting something or



“Allow your personality to come through.”
(Top7Business.com, 2009)

fearing that your mind will go blank.

Entertain: Some of the most entertaining speakers are those that speak from their heart. Encourage students to tie in a personal experience or story. Sometimes a relevant joke can break the ice and set the tone for the presentation. It's important to use voice inflection, pauses and maintain eye contact in order to

connect with your audience. When a presenter seems to be enjoying themselves, the audience will be interested.

Thoughts: Avoid “stinking thinking!” If you tell yourself you're going to make a mistake, you may very well do that exact thing. Before your presentation, picture yourself speaking and the audience reacting in a positive manner. Tell yourself that in five minutes the presentation will be over. The presentation is actually a small part of your day!

Fear is Normal

Children are often afraid of admitting they are scared. New social situations, speaking in front of the class, answering questions aloud, making new friends, participating in physical education, or meeting a new teacher are common fears associated with school. Fears may not be verbalized because students feel they are alone in their feelings. By discussing common fears associated with classrooms or school envi-

When students conquer their fears, all of their endeavors benefit.

ronments, students feel validated and more secure in moving forward. It's important for students to understand that their fears are not unique and experienced by many.

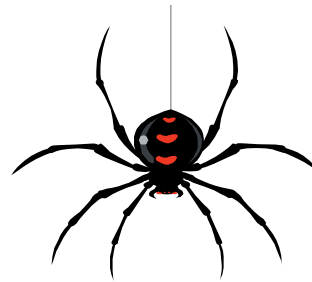
Ask students to write down one fear connected to school. Underneath the fear, write three possible solutions. I'm afraid to make new friends. Possible solutions: (1) Sit with new kids at least once a week at lunch time. (2) Play with new kids at recess. (3) When I have a partner in class, I can ask someone I don't know to work with me.

What is Your Fear?

When asked what people fear most, some may instantly have an answer while others may offer the infamous response, “I'm not scared of anything.” A study conducted several years ago identified the most common fears, some of which relate to children (Child Development & Parenting Information, 2009). They were: darkness, being alone, angry people, rejection, disapproval, fail-

ure, making mistakes, dogs, public speaking, dentists, hospitals (blood), spiders, taking tests, deformed people and police.

Our fears may always be with us, as in the case of spiders or bugs. Other fears disappear as



What do you fear the most?

our experiences become more numerous, as in the case with making new friends, learning to live with failures and mistakes in a healthy way, making trips to the dentist, setting realistic goals and socializing with those who may be different from us.

Perfectionism

In 2001, a report released by the State of our Nation's Youth found that 62% of teens say that pressure to have good grades is a problem. In 2008, the same study found the percentage to have increased to 79% (Connect with Kids, 2009). Although perfectionism is not realistic, some students have difficulty relaxing. "In a study of 36 children in third through fifth grades, researchers found that children who rated high on perfectionism exhibited significantly more anxiety and dissat-



"Academics are only a part of your life."
(connect with kids, 2009)

isfaction with their performance on computer tasks than their low-perfectionism peers, even when both groups performed equally well (Connect with Kids, 2009).

Counselors at the University of Dundee have found the following feelings, thoughts, and beliefs to

be associated with perfectionism: fear of failure, fear of making mistakes, fear of disapproval, all-or-none thinking, and commonly the belief that others are easily successful (Connect with Kids, 2009). Per-

fectionism ironically robs students of opportunities to learn and grow because they avoid circumstances that present the potential for mistakes.

How can educators help? Discuss realistic and unrealistic goals. Ask students when 90%, 80% or 70% is acceptable. Help students recognize the value of "the process" of learning as opposed to focusing on the end result. What power lies in making a mistake? What is the worst thing that can happen if a mistake is made? Our behaviors and thoughts need to be healthy ones, focusing on realistic goals and challenges.

"The" Test

Let's face it, standardized testing causes stress! The pressure of "passing" has become so highly emphasized that students are often overwhelmed with test anxiety as they seek to earn a "perfect score." What advice can we give to students?

Focus on effort! Do well because you know the answers, not for fear of not passing.

Stay positive! Envision reading the questions and calmly marking the

answers.

Exercise! Practice taking deep breaths, mediating and staying relaxed.

Eat right! Skipping breakfast is never a good idea, especially on a test day.

Comfort counts! Wear your favorite jeans or write with your lucky pencil.

Tests simply ask us to demonstrate what we know, what we have

Test taking comes easier to some children than to others.
(eHow, 2009)

learned. An overemphasis on "doing well" often causes students to feel trapped and intimidated. We must acknowledge testing fears; otherwise students feel not only anxious, but embarrassed when their concerns are dismissed with, "Oh, stop worrying. You'll do fine!"

The Fear of Not Fitting In

Let's face it. We all need to feel accepted. For some students, this need is paralleled by fear as students often deal with bullies and cliques.

Bullies: Encourage students to be self-confident. Look others in the eye, stand tall and speak up for others if you see they are mistreated. A bully is looking for a "loner," or someone who is not likely to have

friends or help readily available.

Cliques: It's better to have one or two loyal friends than several fair-weathered friends who tell you who to like and not to like or pressure you into dressing a certain way. Treat others how you wish to be



Friends become more important in middle and high school.

treated and seek out new friendships. It's normal to out-grow friends and make new friends along the way. Being popular is most easily accomplished by being yourself.

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Daphne Morris, M.Ed., met Trevor Romain in 1992 when he visited a school as a guest speaker. Impressed by Trevor's profound and meaningful impact on students, Daphne joined The Trevor Romain Company in 2006. A former elementary school principal, Daphne holds two Master's degrees in education.

July Q&A

Q: How can educators encourage students who are hesitant to make individual or group presentations?

Group presentations are recommended prior to individual speaking assignments. Standing in front of peers is easier when you have someone beside you because the audience's focus is shared. Compare speaking to the preparation that goes into a sport, such as basketball. Practice is paramount. "The more you give a talk, the more automatic it becomes, the more meat it can have, and the more confidence you have in your abilities to give the speech" (School for Champions, 2009). Recommendations may include: practicing alone (saying the speech out loud), looking into a mirror (check for eye contact), giving your speech in a corner (offers a good idea of how you will sound when you speak), recording your presentation, or finding a friendly audience like family or friends.

Encourage students to present with graphs, maps or photos. When the audience is focused on something other than the presenter, eyes are no longer centered on the student, easing their tension and the pressure to speak flawlessly. Previewing videos of others presenting can also offer ideas and set an example for students to follow.

Resources:

Child Development & Parenting Information. "Helping Your Child Deal with Fears & Phobias." <http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/disorders/fears.htm> (accessed June, 2009).

Connect with Kids. "Academic Pressure." http://www.connectwithkids.com/tipsheet/2008/400_aug27/thisweek/080827_pressure.shtml (accessed June, 2009).

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Top7Business.com. "Top 7 Tips For Overcoming the Fear of Speaking." <http://top7business.com/?Top-7-Tips-For-Overcoming-the-Fear-of-Speaking&id=209> (accessed June, 2009).

