

Today's Parent



Stage Fright: How to Help Kids with Performance Anxiety

Does your child get butterflies before ballet recitals, school concerts or class presentations? Performance anxiety is common in kids. We asked experts how to cope.

Written by Kate Winn

Tears, tantrums and tummy aches: all of these symptoms can accompany the common childhood experience of performance anxiety, a familiar topic for Bobcaygeon, Ont., mom Michelle Garrett.* When her son Jesse* was assigned his first class speech in grade three, it created a lot of tension in their home.

When he has to do something in front of others, he shuts down. He cried and refused to do the work until his teacher prompted him at school," Garrett says. Jesse was last to present on speech day, and as soon as he made it to the front of the class, he froze and began to cry. I know, because I was his teacher.

Often called "stage fright," performance anxiety can rear its head in a variety of locations other than formal recitals or concerts, including the sports field and the classroom.

This anxiety can appear at an early age, as Toronto mom Shelley Anderson* knows. Though her three-year-old daughter loves to dance, Anderson struggles each week to get her to participate in ballet class. "She'll beg us to pick her up, or fall to the ground and have a tantrum rather than join in," says Anderson. Anxiety can paralyze older children as well—when my dad was a high school hockey coach, he had a player who threw up before every single game—and can last well into adulthood.

According to Vancouver child psychologist Carla Fry, who specializes in child and adolescent anxiety, some nervousness before performing is extremely common in children. My own daughters, who are six and eight, have been singing and dancing on stage since the age of three, and even now they still talk about having butterflies before their shows. However, for some kids, it's far more serious than that.

When required to perform, many children experience racing heartbeat, headaches and sweating. "But the tummy-related problems are always the most common," says Fry. "It can be stomachaches, nausea or diarrhea. Kids also complain about blushing, because it's so obvious to others."

Anxiety becomes a real problem when the lead-up or aftermath is stressful enough to impact the child's normal functioning, which is usually most evident at home. One eight-year-old student I know appears very confident when speaking in public or performing musically, but she experiences a lot of anxiety both before and after. "I don't like people looking at me, and sometimes before I do it I feel dizzy and shaky, like I'm going to fall," she says. Following a wonderful holiday concert performance, she went home in tears because she felt she had "messed up."



Why are some kids so anxious about performing? "It's a complex interplay between three factors," says Fry. The first is the temperament or personality the child is born with. The second is genetics—30 to 40 percent of any kind of anxiety is understood to be genetic, and children born to anxious parents are more likely to exhibit it. The third factor is learned behaviours, which can stem from a negative experience the child has had in the past, or messages they've received, such as hearing an older sibling say, "public speaking is so scary."

Garrett believes that her son worries about what others think of him, and doesn't want to be embarrassed in front of his class. "He has always struggled with reading, so anything related to that is particularly hard for him, because he lacks the confidence."

Fry says that the first step in helping your child deal with performance anxiety is to explain that these kinds of jitters are normal, but avoid statements like "Don't worry about it," or "You'll be fine." Says Fry, "Anything that smacks of judgment makes it worse." While you may be trying to demonstrate that performance anxiety is no big deal, these kinds of comments can send a message that a child is wrong to feel the way he or she does. Fry suggests starting with an expression of empathy, followed by a statement or question that implies the child will be forging ahead anyway, combined with coping strategies. An example of this could be, "Yes, that's a tricky situation that you're in. Do you want some help to figure out how you're going to cope with it?"

Fry also discourages parents from allowing their children to avoid or run away from the situation that makes them anxious. "The knee-jerk reaction for many parents is to write a note to the teacher, or speak to the coach to try to get their child out of the activity, but that's not the best route in the long run. Unless it's really extreme, the focus should be on building up kids' resilience and power to deal."

In my classroom, I sometimes allow anxious students to present to me privately, which Fry approves of, as long as baby steps are being taken towards growth. "Maybe the next time, you'll record their presentation on the iPad and show a clip to the class, so their peers see them as well. Never let the child out of the situation entirely, or anxiety will continue to grow," she advises. "We know that miniscule steps, and continuing to move forward, help slay the dragon of anxiety."

While kids should be challenged slightly beyond their comfort zone, it's up to parents to decide whether to continue with optional activities, like sports or music, that are causing most of a child's anxiety. "Exposure to the feared event should only happen in proportion to how well the child has been prepared to handle it," advises Fry. This may depend on the support available from the instructor or coach, how easily the child picks up anxiety coping skills, and how much time and patience you have to guide and practise with your child.

It's also important to help children understand what anxiety is. Fry tells kids that the front of our brain knows we're prepared and that the situation's not that bad, but the back of our brain doesn't really understand words or listen to these pep talks, and it overreacts and gets excited—as if there's a real danger. The best way to calm that part of the brain down is with strategies like meditating; slow deep breathing; and loosening up the muscles. (She uses cooked pasta noodles as an example: show kids how to stiffen and relax each of their limbs, wiggling them like floppy noodles.) Going for a leisurely walk, getting ready slowly, and even speaking gently and calmly can help lower the heart rate and get kids feeling relaxed. "A combination of rational thought, paired with body-calming techniques, will make things better—though not perfect," she says.

In the book *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents*, psychologist Reid Wilson and psychotherapist Lynn Lyons suggest getting kids to speak directly to the “worry” whenever it appears. For those with performance anxiety, that may sound like: “Oh, Worry, you always come on recital day and make my tummy hurt. But I don’t need you today, because I’m ready!”

A 2011 study published in the journal *Science* found that students who wrote about their anxieties before tests at school actually performed better, another strategy which may assist kids who are old enough to express their feelings in writing.

It can also be helpful to focus on the child’s journey and the efforts they’ve made, rather than the outcome (for example, winning the competition or getting an A on the test). While we want children to eventually find their own motivation, Fry suggests starting with small rewards which focus on the process, reinforcing the small steps children make to face their fears, despite the anxiety they feel. These rewards can be personalized, depending on what motivates the child. Rewards involving time with parents can be very effective. Maybe it’s a round of Candyland with your little one after she successfully participates in Show and Tell, or maybe it’s a latte break after your teen’s violin concert rehearsal. Reid and Lyons also recommend activity-based incentives to encourage progress. (For younger children, rewards should be smaller and more frequent.)

These parenting techniques may be enough to help many kids tackle their performance fears—but for some, the anxiety persists. Fry suggests seeking professional help if a child’s anxiety is preventing him or her from fulfilling the requirements of the school curriculum, or if it’s affecting his or her ability to cope with normal life (if your child can’t think of anything else, for example, or is having significant trouble eating or sleeping).

Performance anxiety alone is not necessarily a sign of an anxiety disorder, but if it appears with other symptoms of anxiety, such as obsessing about germs, nail-biting or extreme perfectionism, a professional assessment and treatment plan may be the next step.

As for Jesse, after a year of small improvements (first presenting to a partner, then a small group, then a larger group) he got up in front of his entire grade-four class to deliver his next speech. His hands were shaking and he says his stomach was flip-flopping, but he had a smile on his face. Progress.

*Name has been changed.

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