



## Mini Review

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# Reducing Anxiety in Children: Creating Emotionally Safe Places for Children to Learn

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## Introduction

As we enter the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, research is suggesting that children are not only dealing a great deal of anxiety caused directly by school (ref). Academic anxiety related to learning is increasing due to highly stressful teaching methods, reduction of recess, too much homework and an over reliance on testing [1,2]. However, the anxiety is also produced by the stress of the school environment. For many children, armed police officers patrol the hallways and “active shooter drills” are a regular part of every day. Add to this the pervasive presence of bullying, a reduction in the time that children get to engage in self-directed activities and arts based programming [3,4], and an anti-democratic culture in schools [5] and you end up with places that breed anxiety and are not emotionally safe for children.

## Anxiety and Academic Achievement

Anxiety toward school is a growing barrier for many children to achievement. For many children, negative attitudes toward subjects such as mathematics and science begins early a child’s schooling, sometimes even before they enter kindergarten. As children enter formal schooling, the learning process sometimes takes a turn for the worse, especially for girls and minorities. Studies have shown that at this time in children’s learning of mathematics and science, textbooks and high stakes testing take over the process of teaching and the focus shifts from construction of concepts using children’s own thinking to teacher imposed methods of getting the correct answer [6]. Teachers begin to focus on repetition and speed or “timed tests” as important tools for improving academic prowess and skill. This overreliance on timed tests, standardized assessments, achievement at all costs and other high stakes approaches to teaching mathematics reinforce the negative attitude toward schooling that many children have developed in the early years of life [7-9]).

## Physical Safety Anxiety

In the past decade, the prevalence of mass shootings in schools has increased. While solutions to the problem of school shootings is complex and beyond the scope of this article, we do need to recognize that many of the steps taken to keep children physically safe at school such as “active shooter drills” do lead to increased anxiety in children. Schools need to be aware that these types of drills do have an adverse effect on children’s emotional wellbeing and take steps to help children deal with the anxiety of living with such a threat. The rise in anxiety in school children can lead to a rise in undesirable behaviors. Janson and King [10] noted:

A classroom characterized by warmth and affirmation may be the only place where children can safely express their true feelings. In practical terms, this makes emotional security in the classroom a prerequisite to helping each child learn and grow into a socially competent individual (p.3). However, these are all issues that can be addressed and fixed by caring administrators that are committed to making schools safe and supportive places for all children. Reducing the anxiety brought about by the school environment means changing the environment so that it is more student centered, emotionally relevant and open to the many ways in which children can express themselves [11,12]. The emotional wellbeing of students is often overlooked in modern school culture however this attitude must change. We must concern ourselves with the development of the whole child and ensure that our teaching methods and the school environment that we create does not create unnecessary anxiety in children.

## Acknowledgement

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## Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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