



Blog

Understanding Your Unique Role: Child Psychology for Teachers

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Divorce, child abuse, bullying, stress. It doesn't take a Ph.D. to understand why students with these and other problems may have difficulty succeeding in school. They have troubles that weigh much heavier than tomorrow's homework assignment.

“When kids walk into the classroom, they bring all of their emotions,” explains **Dr. Charlotte Reznick**, child and educational psychologist. **“What’s going on at home, their fears, they bring it all in. It’s not realistic to expect them to leave it behind.”**

But bringing these emotions into the classroom can have a serious influence on academic success. **Research from Stanford and the University of Michigan** indicates that students with distress including anxiety, anger, and depression experience educational problems like diminished academic functioning, learning delays, and poor achievement. And with an estimated **one in five** children and adolescents experiencing a mental health disorder at the treatment level, teachers can expect to encounter several, if not many, students who need psychological support.

“Kids learn best when they’re relaxed and focused,” says Reznick. **That’s why school should be a safe place where they can feel comfortable in their learning environment.** School psychologists **Drs. Laurie and Fred Zelinger** recommend creating a warm, nurturing, predictable, and planned environment for students.

“School must be a safe and consistent environment independent of the influence of the surrounding world,” say the Zelingers. And part of creating that environment is providing support to students who are suffering from psychological problems.

While serious or persistent psychological issues require professional help, teachers are on the front line with students, able to offer day-to-day support and even identification of major problems in need of professional referral. And as a trusted, comforting adult figure in their lives, teachers can be a positive force that supports students academically and emotionally as they work through psychological problems.

Common Psychological Issues

Depression, bullying, divorce, even sexual abuse, are issues that students may need help with. How can teachers support students through these difficult times while encouraging academic success?

Bullying

Bullying, the act of repeated physical, verbal, or psychological abuse intended to cause harm, is prevalent in schools today. An [estimated 40 to 80%](#) of school-age children experience bullying at some point, and for 10% to 15% of students, it’s a chronic problem, either as victim or perpetrator.

Students who are bullied may face serious difficulties in school. The [American Psychological Association](#) (APA) explains that victims may blame bullying on their shortcomings, and victimization can lead to physical symptoms that require visits to the school nurse or may result in absenteeism. Chronic victims can become anxious about going to school, and bullying has been associated with negative attitudes toward school and poor school performance as early as kindergarten.

Bullying can make victims feel helpless, and teachers may feel that they themselves are helpless to stop bullying, as most bullying [occurs where adult supervision is minimal](#). But, there are actions teachers can take to stop bullying and support both victim and perpetrator.

The [APA](#) recommends that teachers:

- Respond to bullying events that they witness, as doing so communicates that bullying isn’t acceptable, and can also help victims feel less powerless.
- Improve their response to, and even prevent, bullying by increasing their presence in areas like hallways, playgrounds, and restrooms, “unowned” spaces that without supervision, are welcome areas for bullying. The [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) highlights supervision as an issue of significant importance in bullying as well, explaining that low levels of supervision at schools can be problematic.
- Turn bullying incidents into teachable moments. Address and

engage students in the prevention of bullying by opening up the conversation.

- Set an example by avoiding peer bullying yourself.
- Seek help from the principal, school counselor, or psychologist when dealing with serious or chronic bullying incidents.
- Remember that there is no one-size-fits-all model for bullying intervention. Each approach should be tailored to the situation.
- Never ignore students who report bullying, let bystanders off the hook, or rely too heavily on school zero-tolerance policies.

Teachers can find more information and resources for bullying prevention and support from the APA's [Bullying: A Module for Teachers](#), as well as the Department of Education's [Safe Schools-Healthy Students Initiative](#).

Child Abuse

Approximately [3 million cases](#) of child abuse and neglect are reported each year. These cases include physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as neglect.

Teachers have an excellent opportunity, and responsibility, to recognize, report, and provide support for children suffering from child abuse and neglect. Seasoned teachers are especially sensitive to normal behaviors at various developmental stages, and they may notice when student behaviors fall outside of the normal range they've observed.

The [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) lists behavioral cues that indicate child abuse, including aggressive behavior, sudden or extreme changes in academic performance, defiance, a fear of adults, and a desire not to leave school. Teachers should recognize that challenging behavior from “bad kids” may actually be a cry for help. Physical signs of child abuse can include numerous, deep bruises or broken bones, malnutrition, or inappropriate clothing. Teachers who suspect cases of child abuse should contact their state department of social services, CPS, or other local reporting agency, in addition to their school principal.

But reporting abuse isn't enough. Teachers need to support abused students in the reporting process and beyond. Students who are abused are likely to experience a lot of distress. In addition to abuse, they may be separated from their parents and siblings, living outside of their home, and making court appearances. During this time, they may have difficulty getting to school and have trouble staying focused in the classroom.

During this likely stressful time, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [recommends](#) teachers:

- Provide a constant, stable environment for children.
- Offset possible negative self-concepts and isolation by offering positive school experiences like increased contact with classmates and friendship development opportunities.
- Address the needs of maltreated children through classroom exercises, including creating a feelings barometer, teaching the use of a formula for problem solving, structuring learning projects with cooperative activities, and teaching conflict resolution.

Divorce

Divorce is often traumatic for children, and can even be [associated with post-traumatic stress](#). Most children will adjust to divorce, but it's typical for them to [experience distress](#) for one to two years following the divorce, including aggression and poor school performance. During this time, it's essential that teachers and schools provide support for students and parents going through a divorce.

The [University of Missouri](#) recommends creating a supportive atmosphere for divorced families by being sensitive to family diversity:

- Invite both parents to school activities.
- Offer multiple parent orientation nights.
- Send notes home to both parents, giving them the message that they're both important to a student's success in the classroom.
- Help parents who are struggling with a divorce by offering to find counselors or programs.

Teachers can support students with divorced parents by being sensitive to their needs. [Purdue University](#) recommends:

- Watching for signs that the child needs to talk.
- Helping students find creative ways to express their feelings.
- Keeping both parents involved in school conversations.
- Create classroom activities that encourage understanding of all types of families, which may be helpful not just for divorced children, but all students.
- Offer opportunities for students to express their feelings and communicate about their family.

Depression

Experts used to think depression was a problem exclusive to adults, but in the past two decades [depression in children](#) has been taken more seriously. Now, we know that even young

children can have treatable depression. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [reports](#) that about 5% of children and adolescents in the general population suffers from depression, a condition that can seriously affect school performance. Depression in students may result from abuse, bullying, divorce, or hormonal changes. It may even stem from exposure to traumatic events including terrorism.

Teachers can provide support to depressed students by recognizing their symptoms and taking appropriate interventions. The [Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development](#) (ASCD) highlights the signs of depressed children in school, including a lack of participation, isolation from peers, poor work completion, difficulty concentrating, hypersensitivity, defiance, and self-deprecating or pessimistic comments. Students who express feelings of hopelessness, give away personal possessions, and make statements like “I won’t be around” may also be [at risk for suicide](#).

Depressed students should be offered professional therapy, but teachers can help as well. The [National Association of School Psychologists](#) (NASP) recommends that teachers:

- Develop a relationship with depressed students, expressing care for the student and a willingness to talk.
- Take a positive approach when dealing with the student, rather than using punishment.
- Keep in mind that students don’t choose to be depressed, and provide extra support and attention.
- Consider offering adjustments or accommodations on assignments, such as breaking assignments into smaller pieces, helping with study habits, or pairing depressed students with peers who can help.
- Provide opportunities for success, creating positive activities that allow students to express their competence.
- Seek help from support personnel, consulting with a school psychologist for individual planning.
- The ASCD [also recommends](#) that schools establish a “touchstone teacher” for depressed students, who meets regularly with the student to review schoolwork, set goals, and coordinate with other teachers.

ASCD’s [Responding to a Student’s Depression](#) discusses symptoms of depression and teacher support actions through the lens of “Rita,” a fictional 14-year-old student who experiences depression as she adjusts to a new school.

Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol abuse is often thought of as a college problem, but the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [reports](#) that underage drinking is widespread even at the high school level. By age 15, 50% of teens have had at least one drink, and by age 18, that number jumps to 70%. Underage drinking risks include death, serious injuries, impaired judgment, increased risk for physical and sexual assault, and brain development problems. Five thousand people under the age of 21 die each year from alcohol-related incidents, and nearly 200,000 more visit an emergency room for alcohol-related injuries.

Students who drink may show [warning signs](#) including academic or behavioral problems, diminished interest in activities, memory or concentration problems, or even signs of drunkenness at school like slurred speech or coordination problems. The [U.S. Surgeon General](#) recommends that educators actively work to change teen drinking attitudes and create an environment that discourages teen drinking.

Educators can create an environment that discourages teen drinking by taking steps recommended by the Surgeon General, including:

- Encouraging student involvement and development of talents.
- Offering opportunities for validation and belonging.
- Increasing positive outcomes as a mentor.
- Providing information to parents on the consequences of underage alcohol use.
- Decreasing alcohol use by consistently enforcing alcohol rules.
- Teaching students how to resist peer pressure.
- Identifying students who need alcohol intervention.

Visit the [Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking: What It Means to You-A Guide to Action for Educators](#) for more information on what teachers can do to prevent and reduce underage drinking. You can also use the NIAAA's [Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention for Youth](#), and the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking's [classroom materials](#).

Drugs

Nearly one in five high students [uses drugs on campus](#). In fact, a [survey](#) from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University reveals that schools are a convenient place for students to find and abuse drugs, with 44% of high school students indicating that they know a student who sells drugs at their school.

Like those who drink, students who abuse drugs are at risk for serious consequences. According to the [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#), these include school failure, increased risk of serious drug use as an adult, and poor judgment. Students who abuse drugs may exhibit warning signs including personality changes, decreased interest, absences, discipline problems, and a drop in grades.

Teachers can help prevent drug use among students by participating in [research-based](#) prevention programs and fostering an anti-drug environment in the classroom. The DEA [encourages teachers](#) to take approaches that have proven effective in preventing drug use among teens:

- Teach life skills and drug refusal techniques.
- Strengthen social bonding and caring relationships.
- Develop skills in self-control, emotional awareness, communication, and social problem solving.

If you suspect a student is already using drugs, it's your job to connect the student with the appropriate resources. Refer the student to a guidance counselor or administrator, who can help the student get [substance abuse treatment](#). Be supportive as the student works through treatment, and communicate with your school counselor and the student's treatment coordinator to find out how you can help through curriculum and assignments.

There are many resources for student drug prevention and awareness. Read [Preventing Drug Abuse Among Children and Adolescents](#) from the National Institute on Drug Abuse to learn about research-based drug prevention principles. Additionally, you can visit the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) to find resources for teachers, including activity guides, curricula, and other helpful publications.

Everyday Issues

Major events like divorce, drug use, or abuse require teacher support, but everyday concerns can impact students as well. Though they may seem less serious, chronic problems like poor social skills and anxiety can interfere with academics and development, and teachers should support students who need help in these measures.

Fitting In

In today's classroom, teachers have a responsibility to teach more than academics: they must teach social skills as well. Good social skills matter more than ever, according to career expert [Penelope Trunk](#). Trunk reports that today's most dependable jobs are the ones that require exceptional people skills, so it's essential that students learn how to get along with others. The [NASP](#) reports that most children will pick up positive social skills through everyday interactions, but still encourages educators to reinforce this development with instruction.

According to NASP, good social skills are beneficial both to individual students and the classroom as a whole, creating a positive and safe school environment with resiliency and personal responsibility. A positive social environment makes schools safer, promoting anger management, social problem solving, conflict management, peer resistance, and more. Poor social skills may manifest in difficulties with interpersonal relationships, peer rejection, signs of depression, aggression and anxiety, and poor academic performance. Students with poor social skills may also have a higher incident of involvement in the criminal justice system.

Teachers can help students of any age develop positive social skills through appropriate interventions. Positive reinforcement of good social skills is recommended by NASP. Teachers may want to create situations that encourage students to make the right choice, and intentionally catch them (and praise them for) doing the right thing.

For Reznick, a positive social environment in the classroom starts at the beginning of the year. Reznick encourages teachers to set social expectations by asking students what kind of classroom they want, giving the options of a “friendly” or “mean” classroom. Students should pick a “friendly” classroom, and teachers can take the opportunity to explain how they can get there, collaboratively creating rules, or social expectations, that students will follow.

Teachers can also promote positive social skills by encouraging student interaction. The [Science Education Resource Center \(SERC\)](#) at Carleton College recommends structuring your class for student interaction:

- Provide opportunities for students to work in pairs and small groups.
- Encourage collaborative work.
- Provide time and resources for in-depth discussions that include the entire class.
- Try activities like [think-pair-share exercises](#) or [cooperative learning techniques](#).

Teachers can find more resources and information on promoting positive social skills from the NASP in the [Social Skills: Promoting Positive Behavior, Academic Success, and School Safety](#) fact sheet. You can learn more about student interaction from SERC’s [Student-Student Classroom Interaction](#) resource.

Anxiety

Anxiety can be a chronic or occasional problem, but something that every student will experience at one point or another. In fact, according to NASP, [anxiety is a normal part of development](#).

Whether it's social anxiety or stress about a big test or assignment, anxiety is in your classroom, and it's your job to help students deal with it.

Students experiencing anxiety may feel frustrated, stuck, or unable to make decisions. Anxiety interferes with a student's ability to think clearly, and students may not be able to concentrate as their minds rush from one problem to another. This can keep students from completing their schoolwork effectively and in a timely manner. But teachers can be a calming and reassuring voice against anxiety in the classroom and beyond.

NASP offers [anxiety-busting recommendations](#) for parents that are also useful in the classroom:

- Maintaining realistic and attainable goals.
- Providing a consistent routine for the classroom.
- Offering consistency in discipline.
- Meeting anxiety with patience rather than criticism, as it is not willful misbehavior.
- Teaching strategies for managing anxiety, like organizing materials and time.
- Providing resources for relaxing under stressful situations.
- Practicing stressful tasks like public speaking in a safe, non-threatening environment.

As a common experience for children, anxiety does not usually require professional intervention. But for [one in eight children](#), anxiety is more than a passing problem — it's a disorder. Students who are afraid to go to school, have excessive worry, experience flashbacks, or have extreme fear of social situations may be suffering from an anxiety disorder that requires treatment. These students should be referred to a school counselor or administrator who can help them connect with professional help.

NASP's [Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders in Children](#) offers more information on what's normal and abnormal in anxiety, and how to support students with anxiety.

It's not possible for teachers to solve every problem for their students, nor should they try to do so. But a positive learning environment that provides emotional support can go a long way in helping students deal with traumatic or troubling issues, whether they're a chronic problem or a passing season. Do this, and you'll give students the tools they need to stay on a path of academic success.