

DIANE PETERS MAYER

OVERCOMING SCHOOL ANXIETY

How to Help Your Child Deal With Separation, Tests,
Homework, Bullies, Math Phobia, and Other Worries



**Overcoming School Anxiety:
How to Help Your Child Deal
with Separation, Tests,
Homework, Bullies, Math
Phobia, and Other Worries**

DIANE PETERS MAYER

AMACOM

Advance praise for *Overcoming School Anxiety*

“*Overcoming School Anxiety* is empowering for both parent and child. I wish I had had these practical solutions when my son was younger. Anxiety and its causes are defined clearly and made simple to understand. Among the exercises given, the breathing exercise is my favorite. It applies in both scholastic and social situations. I can see these techniques even help my son with his anxiety on the pitching mound. I look forward to sharing this insightful and helpful book with friends who struggle with anxiety.”

—Betty Ann Castaneda, parent, California

“I am a stay-at-home mom of two wonderful daughters, ages 3 and 5. My 5-year-old has already exhibited signs of school anxiety. She is extremely shy and introverted and has a difficult time forming new relationships with her classmates. I am very excited to be reading *Overcoming School Anxiety* at this time. I feel it will be an important tool that I will use constantly to deal with her issues. I especially like the way the table of contents is written. Easy to skim to find the exact topic I need. The most important concept in the book that will help my daughter is the stress level at home. We constantly procrastinate in the mornings and always seem to be scrambling to get out the door. I didn’t realize the effect this had on my daughter’s anxiety (I thought it only made me feel stressed and anxious!). I see this book as an invaluable tool that will stay by my bedside throughout my daughter’s school career.”

—Lisa Nero, parent, California

“When your child has school anxiety, sometimes, try as you might, you just can’t understand your child’s behavior. And that is very frustrating. Diane Peters Mayer’s clear explanations, perfect examples, and practical steps can change all of that frustration.”

—Farrell Silverberg, Ph.D., N.C.Psy.A., psychologist, psychoanalyst, and author, *Make the Leap: A Practical Guide to Breaking the Patterns That Hold You Back*

“This book is an informative, concise, and practical guide to anxiety and many other important issues of today’s youth. It provided me with effective, easy to follow and implement solutions that helped my students. I would strongly recommend it to any teacher or parent as a practical guidebook to better understanding and aiding our youth.”

—Waldemar Plichta, ME, foreign language teacher, Cedar Crest High School, Lebanon, Pennsylvania

“. . . wonderfully thought provoking and highly interesting and informative.”
—Ann-Marie Mott, instructor, Bank Street College Graduate School of Education, former Lower School Coordinator, Bank Street School for Children, New York City

“In her book *Overcoming School Anxiety* Ms. Mayer describes the differences between developmentally appropriate anxiety and anxiety that may require professional assistance. Parents will feel empowered after reading Ms. Mayer’s book, for she provides guidelines and exercises that help children alleviate anxiety.”

—Shirley Kraenbring, M.Ed., parent and kindergarten teacher

“Ms. Mayer has compiled a resource that is bound to help both parent and child build emotional and academic success. Not only does it outline easy-to-understand principles, guidelines, and applied techniques tailored to specific problems, it does so in empowering ways that curtail guilt and defeat. A bonus lies in the process where, in a nonthreatening manner, parents may discover insight into their own struggles, which can compound the benefit for their children and family relationships. In a cultural environment driven toward academic achievement, this strength-based model supports doing one’s best while de-emphasizing the pressure to perform.

“I am already implementing these concepts into my practice, and because the book cuts across professional and nonprofessional boundaries, I can recommend it not only to colleagues and clients but to family and friends as well.”

—Karen Carter Katz, LCSW, BCD, Clinical Social Worker, private practice, Doylestown, Pennsylvania

“*Overcoming School Anxiety* is a guide that disentangles the emotional and physical symptoms of school anxiety with accessible definitions and practical exercises. Diane’s breathing variations and body awareness activities will appeal to a child’s natural sense of humor and discovery.”

—Mary Namiotka, LCSW, Pennsylvania Counseling Services, Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania

“A clear, concise, systematic guide for parents to approach a difficult and often insurmountable problem. An excellent resource for schools. A must for staff and parents.”

—Missy Leinbach, parent and elementary Spanish teacher, Ambler, Pennsylvania

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DIANE PETERS MAYER

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This book is dedicated to Benzion Rappoport, Ph.D.—
humanist, master therapist, scholar, teacher, and musician.
You were, and always will be, a driving force in my journey as
a therapist and writer.

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Foreword

THE GREATEST GIFT TO ANY PARENT IS HOPE FOR IMPROVEMENT when his or her child is struggling. For parents of the 6 million children who suffer from school anxiety, an increased understanding and the formulation of a clear, concise treatment plan can greatly diminish frustration levels for both the child and the parent.

In this valuable and highly readable book, Diane Peters Mayer provides a sensitive, useful guide that equips parents with strategies to help their child. She normalizes the often overwhelming challenge of dealing with incapacitating school anxiety and formulates practical, solution-focused directives to help lessen worries, phobias, and performance issues. Rather than the problem ruling the child, she provides the tools for the child to rule the problem.

Through better understanding of the physiological, psychological, and behavioral components of anxiety, parents can create a framework to help their child identify the symptoms of progressive worry and its debilitating consequences. Common difficulties including homework and test anxiety, separation issues, and refusal to attend school are addressed with simple, effective exercises that parents can utilize at home with their child. Bullying, social and familial stressors, anxiety disorders, and phobias are discussed and additional important attention is given to learning, physical, and emotional challenges. Parents will be able to assess whether their child's worry is appropriate and productive or chronic and dysfunctional.

To help parents navigate the often turbulent waters of school anxi-

ety, Diane has created a self-help program that can be instituted directly with their child. With pertinent, empathetic directives, this book can assist parents in knowing what to say, how to elicit professional help, and perhaps, most important, how to teach their children to manage anxiety themselves. By learning to master school anxiety, both the child and the parents regain a sense of control over their lives. Lending her professional experience in working with families affected by school anxiety, Diane encourages parents to utilize proven techniques for reducing anxiety. Relaxation and mindfulness exercises, role-playing, and the use of systematic desensitization are presented with detailed explanations. Multiple approaches are presented for a variety of situations. Each chapter provides step-by-step instructions that are easy to understand and practice in both school and home settings. The importance of nutrition and exercise are given special attention along with the many treatment options available within traditional and alternative medicine. Treatment modalities including psychotherapy, holistic techniques, and medication are outlined in full. Parents will learn which treatments are best suited to their child's needs.

With wisdom and concrete, practical examples, Diane has written a self-help guide that parents will value as a treasured resource. This book brings hope to parents and empowers them in helping their child move toward productive academic, social, and psychological ways of living.

—Deirdre Shaffer, MSW

Preface

DEAR PARENT,

The book you hold in your hands contains information and a self-help program that is a beginning point for you to help your child overcome school anxiety. As you can attest, school anxiety creates distress for your child and causes disruption in your family. *Overcoming School Anxiety* lays out the many reasons children become anxious in the learning environment and teaches you ways your child can become calm, manage the homework load, do well on tests, make friends, and feel good about himself or herself in school.

I have been developing the Overcoming School Anxiety Program throughout my eighteen years as a psychotherapist in private practice in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, working with school-anxious children and their parents. However, the real beginnings of this program come out of my own painful experiences with school anxiety. Although not formally diagnosed with a learning disability, as an adult I finally put a name to the struggles I had with math that could make school a living hell. Called dyscalculia, the condition is dyslexia with numbers and mathematical patterns. I also suffered from separation anxiety disorder in the early grades in elementary school, and all the way up until high school, I was considered an underachiever. I'm smart, but school anxiety buried my potential. When I had children, my youngest daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia in first grade. I know firsthand how it feels to be a parent with a child who struggled in school.

As a psychotherapist, I made anxiety disorders my specialty, and I am passionate about helping children overcome school anxiety. It took discipline and hard work to accept, face, and eventually conquer my own school anxiety. Your child can, too, with your patience, support, and determination—*Overcoming School Anxiety* will help you do it.

Throughout the book, the vignettes of children with school anxiety mainly come from children and parents whom I have worked with over the years. A small number are the children of friends. Names and all identifying information have been changed to ensure confidentiality. Thanks to them all.

—Diane Peters Mayer, MSW

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To my husband and children for their continued support and understanding when I’m locked away in front of my computer meeting a deadline.

And to all the parents and their school-anxious children who have allowed me the honor of working with them in my therapy practice. As much as I have helped them to overcome their anxiety, they have helped me, too, in my continued growth as a therapist.

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How to Use the Overcoming School Anxiety Program

OVERCOMING SCHOOL ANXIETY IS FILLED WITH INFORMATION THAT explains why children develop school anxiety. It also includes a program to help your child take control of anxiety and overcome it. In order to get the maximum results from the program, use the following guidelines:

1. Read through the table of contents to get an overall idea of the content of each chapter.
2. Zero in on the problems your child is experiencing, but also read the exercises at the end of each chapter for possible adaptation to your child's specific problems.
3. Take your time learning the exercises before you teach them to your child.
4. For faster results, make practice part of your child's daily routine.
5. Keep an "Overcoming School Anxiety Journal" to keep materials handy and to chart progress. Use a three-hole loose-leaf binder to make it easy to add new information. Date all materials so your child can look back to see how far he or she has come.
6. Help your child open up to the program, explaining that overcoming school anxiety takes practice and time, and that some of the exercises may be difficult to learn, but he or she can do it.
7. Have your child examined by your family physician before beginning the exercise part of the program.

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What Is School Anxiety?



EVERYONE EXPERIENCES ANXIETY. AND MANY ADULTS AND CHILDREN experience quite a bit of stress in their daily lives that can lead to more anxiety. There are many causes of school anxiety, and children who have it may feel stressed out and unhappy five days a week, nine months out of the year.

Chuck, a fifth grader, has severe test anxiety that has been building for days about an upcoming social studies test. As soon as he gets out of bed on the morning of the test, he begins to think about it, which causes his stomach to knot, his breathing to become shallow, and his heart to pound. By the time Chuck sits down to breakfast, his head is aching and he says he feels sick and wants to stay home.

Mika, in third grade, is being bullied and ostracized by a popular group of girls whom she would like to be part of. They are nice to her one day, but either don't talk to her or make fun of her the next. Not knowing how this group will treat her from day to day has Mika anxious almost all of the time. Every morning is a fight just to get her out of bed and to the school bus on time, leaving Mika and her parents exhausted.

Children who are stressed about school on a daily basis become anxious. They have to contend with the physical and mental manifestations of anxiety, which are uncomfortable, even distressing at times. In

this chapter you will learn how and why anxiety begins, what the symptoms of anxiety are, the effects of school anxiety, and how to begin to help your child.

Is Anxiety Always a Bad Thing?

Anxiety is a normal aspect of life and of being human, and it has a positive side to it, too. In order to have a zest for life, to go after dreams, to be mentally alert, and to achieve goals, anxiety is one of the driving forces that can help. Although that adrenaline rush is necessary to reach one's personal best, anxiety needs to be channeled for positive use.

Conrad, in sixth grade, has been playing the cello since third grade. He is talented, loves to practice, and is one of the soloists in his school orchestra. Starting a day or two before each concert, his stomach tightens up whenever he thinks about playing. A few hours before the concert, he feels jumpy and is unable to relax. He rehearses his solo over and over again in his mind. Minutes before his solo, stress hormones course through his body, his breathing becomes rapid, and all his senses are heightened. But instead of causing him to fall apart with anxiety, these physical changes sharpen his abilities, and he plays his part perfectly and with intense feeling. The audience goes wild after he finishes.

Every performer, every person who wants to reach optimal performance, must learn how to take control of anxiety instead of being controlled by it, and use it in a positive way to enhance his or her life. Anxiety is also a motivator for making necessary life changes. For example, if your sixth-grade child underachieves because she doesn't feel like putting out an effort, but begins to worry about not making the grade in middle school, then her anxiety can jump-start her into becoming a good student.

Anxiety is also a normal response to life situations, such as experiencing the death of a loved one, having an illness, experiencing parental

divorce, starting at a new school, taking a test, or getting the lead in the school play, which all create normal levels of anxiety and response.

Anxiety Differs from Fear

The words *fear* and *anxiety* are often used interchangeably, but they have different meanings. Fear is something external, specific, and definable. For example, if your child is waiting at the school bus stop and a car veers in her direction, her brain will instantly signal to her body, “Danger!” In a split second, her brain sends messages to her legs to jump out of the way to safety. The fear of being hurt by the car can be explained in specific terms. If you ask her, she’ll say she was afraid and reacted by jumping out of the way.

Anxiety, on the other hand, is nonspecific; it’s intangible in nature. There is no real bodily danger. For example, if your child is afraid to leave home to go to school, and you question why, he may not be able to give you a concrete answer, because anxious feelings are often hard to define. Maybe he fears something will happen to you when he is gone, or you will forget to pick him up at the bus stop, even though that has never happened. The “what-ifs”—the intense worry about the possibility that those things might happen—are what cause anxiety, making it very difficult for him to separate from you even for a few hours.

What Happens When Anxiety Turns Negative?

Anxiety becomes a problem when it causes emotional pain and suffering and disrupts your child’s ability to function well at school and in daily life. When anxiety becomes that severe and chronic it is called a *disorder*. If your child has severe school anxiety, she will be limited in every area of development in her life because of the intensity of the feelings and symptoms. Anxiety disorders affect over 20 million adults, adolescents, and children in the United States, making it the number one mental health issue. Americans spend billions of dollars annually

trying to alleviate anxious suffering by traditional and alternative modes of treatment.

Over 6 million school-age children suffer from school anxiety, trying to cope with physical and mental symptoms that are upsetting, even terrifying, at times.

What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is defined as a state of intense agitation, foreboding, tension, and dread, occurring from a real or perceived threat of impending danger. The experience of anxiety is unique for each person, but it does have general physical and emotional characteristics.

It is important to note that the physical and mental symptoms of anxiety such as rapid heartbeat, stomachaches, and headaches are also found in many other medical conditions, like heart problems. If you, your child, or anyone in your family experiences persistent physical complaints, don't assume the cause is stress related but have the person checked by your family physician immediately.

Anxiety is a mind-body reaction that occurs instantaneously, and its effects are felt physiologically, behaviorally, and psychologically all at the same time. There are dozens of symptoms of anxiety that range from mild, such as having butterflies before answering a question in class, to severe, such as blanking out or having a panic attack when called to the board to solve a problem. It is important for you to be familiar with the symptoms of anxiety so you can explain to your child what is happening to him when he gets anxious. For example, if your child understands that the intense adrenaline rush he feels when anxiety hits cannot harm him, it may prevent his anxiety from spiraling out of control into a panic attack—instead he could learn to say to himself, “I know this is just a chemical in my body that is making me feel bad, but it can't really hurt me.” Physical symptoms include the following:

- Shallow breathing and hyperventilation
- Intense rush of adrenaline and other stress hormones
- Pounding heartbeat, heart palpitations, and sweating

- Shaky limbs and trembling
- Body and muscle tension
- Dry mouth
- Headaches
- Nausea, diarrhea, and/or vomiting

Other physical manifestations of anxiety include skin eruptions, hives and rashes, fatigue, and eating and sleeping problems. The mental and emotional symptoms are equally distressing and include feeling overwhelmed, loss of concentration, feeling out of control, helplessness, hopelessness, anger, and shame. Behaviors in your child to watch for include acting-out behaviors such as angry outbursts and tantrums; refusal to go to school or to do homework; crying; inability to sleep; curtailment of activities; and avoidance of social situations, places, and certain people.

What Is School Anxiety?

School anxiety is being used as a broad term in this book. It refers, in part, to the problems from home that children bring to school including having an anxiety disorder; being learning disabled; or dealing with family issues, such as divorce or childhood trauma. However, the school environment can be a problematic place, too, with its emphasis on evaluation, achievement, and testing. Other factors might include peer pressure, being bullied, or not getting along with a teacher. This book will cover the myriad causes of school anxiety.

The Short- and Long-Term Effects of School Anxiety

Children with severe school anxiety are unlikely to outgrow it. However, the ways that anxiety manifests its effects can be damaging, making intervention and treatment essential to a child's health and well-being. Short-term effects of school anxiety include the following:

- Missing out on important schoolwork if frequent absences or school refusal occur, stunting intellectual development and creating a record of poor academic performance

- Not being able to relate well to peer group reduces social growth
- Potential increase in frustration levels, stress, and tension among family members

Long-term effects of school anxiety can include chronic anxiety or the development of an anxiety disorder, chronic underachievement in school, low self-esteem, and difficulties in achieving a satisfying personal and professional adulthood.

Why Is My Child Anxious?

The answer to why a child has anxiety is complex. There is no known single cause of anxiety and many experts believe it is caused by a combination of innate characteristics and external experiences, situations, and events.

Heredity

DNA is a personal blueprint, determining height, hair color, body type, and innate talents. Even a person's attitude about life, certain behaviors, emotional structure, and the degree of sensitivity to internal and external stimuli have been linked to genetics through years of research. Anxiety and many related disorders seem to run in families.

Biology

The physical and mental manifestations of anxiety create an intense arousal to real or perceived dangers. The nervous system, which includes the brain, spinal cord, organs, nerves, and chemicals in the body, produces these symptoms and emotions. Many experts believe that people who experience high arousal to perceived danger have a malfunction in brain chemicals that send messages throughout the body telling it that there is real danger that needs to be responded to even when there is no actual threat.

Personality Type

The intrinsic qualities and characteristics that include beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, emotions, habits, and behaviors make up personality. How

these biological, psychological, and sociological factors combine in a unique way as a personality continues to tantalize researchers. Children who experience a high degree of anxiety seem to share many of the same personality traits and characteristics, which include:

- Greater degree of creativity and imagination; may have vivid mental images of himself in scary or terrifying situations leading to worry about the future; finds it difficult if not impossible to turn off these images.
- Difficulty in or fear of expressing feelings because others may get angry, or fear of losing control of emotions.
- Rigid thinking, for example, life is black or white, right or wrong; may be inflexible and unforgiving toward self and others.
- Perfectionism—a setup for failure and anxiety because of the attempt to achieve unrealistic goals and the focus on minor mistakes and flaws instead of seeing the positive side of things.

Other personal characteristics associated with anxiety include having an excessive need for acceptance and approval from others to feel worthwhile; being extremely sensitive to criticism; comparing oneself negatively to others; and being unaware of or ignoring a high degree of stress to the point where anxiety manifests itself in other ways, for example, as a feeling of physical illness.

Childhood and Family Factors

Mental health experts agree that childhood experiences, including the parents' style of parenting, combine with the child's innate qualities, such as the child's degree of emotional sensitivity, in the development of anxiety disorders.

It is not uncommon for parents to blame themselves for their child's anxiety. Maybe a parent is anxious and feels the child has learned to be anxious or is overly sensitive because of hereditary factors. Some parents blame themselves for feeling helpless to stop their child's suffering. Perhaps you blame yourself for your child's school anxiety. If so, remember that being a parent is a difficult job—and we spend quite a bit

She specializes in working with children and adults who have anxiety attacks, school anxiety, and panic attacks. She is the author of **OVERCOMING SCHOOL ANXIETY: How to Help Your Child Deal With Separation, Tests, Homework, Bullies, Math Phobia, and Other Worries**. You can find more of her advice and insights in to school anxiety at her blog, www.overcomingschoolanxiety.com. Back-to-School Worry and Anxiety. You can't miss the back-to-school shopping rush, it's everywhere from newspaper ads, to TV, to the Internet. Stores are packed with parents and children buying book bags, notebooks, lunchbox