Anxiety, Learning/Developmental Disabilities, and the IEP

ERIN GIBBONS, PH.D.
NESCA, P.C.
PLAINVILLE, MA AND NEWTON, MA
My Background

- Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Suffolk University 2009
- Post-doctoral fellowship in the Developmental Medicine Center at Boston Children's Hospital 2009-2011
- Joined NESCA in 2011
- Neuropsychological evaluations with students aged 0-22
What is Anxiety?

- Includes various disorders/diagnoses ranging from mild to severe
  - Generalized Anxiety Disorder
  - Panic Disorder
  - Agoraphobia
  - Specific Phobias
  - Social Anxiety Disorder
  - Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
  - Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
  - Separation Anxiety Disorder
An estimated 19% of adults (18 and older) in the U.S. had an anxiety disorder in the past year (NIMH).

Prevalence rates are higher for women (23.4%) than men (14.3%)

Among adolescents aged 13-18, an estimated 31.9% had an anxiety disorder
  - 8.3% had a severe disorder
  - Higher for girls than boys
Individuals with learning or developmental disabilities show significantly higher rates of anxiety than the general population.
My Recent Cases

- Ages ranged from 3-18
- 15 students with ASD; 7 had co-existing anxiety
- 9 students with language-based learning disabilities; 7 had anxiety
- 5 students with ADHD; 3 had anxiety
- 1 student with NLD and anxiety
- 2 students with intellectual disabilities; 1 had anxiety
- 2 students with primary anxiety disorder diagnoses (ages 4 and 7)
Stress vs. Anxiety – What’s the Difference?

- Stress
  - Physical reaction to imminent harm
  - Our body’s way of protecting us from harm
  - Good stress vs. bad stress

- Anxiety
  - Worrying about what might be as opposed to what is
STRESS CURVE

PERFORMANCE

fatigue
exhaustion
laid back
inactive
too little stress (underload)
optimum stress
too much stress (overload)
burn-out
breakdown
anxiety/panic/anger

STRESS LEVEL

Taken from Dreamstime.com
Anxiety and Learning

- Chicken or egg phenomenon
- Interconnectedness between anxiety/emotions, attention, and learning
- Heightened anxiety interferes with executive functioning
What is Executive Functioning?

Self-Regulation
- Attention
- Behaviors
- Emotions

Metacognition
- Planning/Organization
- Time Management
- Initiation
- Working Memory
- Sustaining Effort
- Self-monitoring
- Cognitive Flexibility
Executive Functioning at School

- Organizing materials
- Getting started
- Managing transitions
- Maintaining attention
- Staying seated
- Asking for help
- Recognizing errors
- Regulating emotions
Executive Functioning at Home

- Maintaining a clean bedroom
- Waking up and getting ready for school
- Packing school bag – homework, sports gear, instrument, etc.
- Finishing homework
- Following household rules
- Controlling emotional reactions/managing frustration
What Does Anxiety Look Like?

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze
Fight

- Irritable
- Defensive
- Quick tempered
- Argumentative
- Impulsive
- Oppositional
- Defiant
Flight

- Avoidance
  - Leaving the classroom
  - Failing to turn in assignments
  - Not participating in discussions
  - Being the “class clown”

- Distractibility
  - Daydreaming
  - Sleepiness
Freeze

- Trouble getting started on tasks
- Refusal to answer
- “Deer in headlights”
- Looking blank/numb
Anxiety in the Classroom

**Learning**
- Attention/focus
- Getting started
- Remembering instructions
- Thinking flexibly
- Engaging in class

**Emotional well-being**
- Self-esteem
- Constant worrying
- Low frustration tolerance
- Staying motivated

**Behavior**
- Acting out
- Defiance
- Skipping class
The “Toxic Triad”

- Emotional Control
- Attentional Control
- Executive Function

Borrowed from Dr. Angela Currie with permission
The “Flight” or “Freeze” Response Students

- Symptoms might go unnoticed at school
  - Distracted, sleepy, frequent trips to the bathroom
  - Little classroom participation
  - Quiet, reserved with peers
  - Generally able to “hold it together”

- These students often have meltdowns as soon as they get in the car/home
- Parents have lots of concerns but school has few or none
The “Fight” Response Students

- Tend to be misunderstood as “behavior problems”
- Parents might have fewer concerns than school
- Traditional behavioral approaches are unlikely to be effective
  - Anxiety trumps delayed gratification
Anxiety and the IEP
Eligibility

- IEP flow chart
- One student can have multiple disability areas in IEP
- If anxiety is having an impact – need to document in IEP
  - Add “Emotional” disability if needed
What is “Effective Progress”?

- Not just academic progress
- Student must be shown to make effective progress in all areas:
  - Academics
  - Social
  - Emotional
  - Behavioral
  - Motor/Physical
Levels of Support at School
Classroom Supports

- General education teacher can provide social-emotional supports to all students
  - Warnings about transitions
  - Create a predictable routine and consistent expectations
- Specific programs
  - Zones of Regulation or How Does My Engine Run? for younger students
  - Social Thinking
- Have a “calm down” space in the classroom
- Provide frequent movement breaks, gentle stretching, etc.
- Consult with therapists, school psychologists, etc.
Addressing Anxiety Through the IEP

- Goals and benchmarks
- Need benchmarks to be measurable
- Frequency/intensity of services is driven by the impact of the anxiety
What Supports are Available?

- Accommodations
  - Classroom accommodations
  - Testing accommodations
- Services
  - Consultation
    - School psychologist works with classroom teacher
    - School staff consult with private therapists
Supports continued

- Services
  - Push-in services (within the classroom)
    - Aide support
  - Pull-out services (in a separate setting)
    - Counseling sessions
    - Social Skills groups
- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) still applies
Specialized Programs Within the District

- May be necessary for students with more severe disabilities or those not making effective progress within the mainstream
  - Partial inclusion
  - Substantially separate

- Franklin has specialized programs for:
  - Intensive needs (intellectual & developmental disabilities)
  - Emotional/behavioral needs
  - Language-based instruction
Out-of-district Placements

- When programming within the district has become increasingly restrictive and student is still not making effective progress
- Specific placement is driven by student’s individual needs
  - e.g., ABA program or therapeutic school?
Questions?

ERIN GIBBONS
EGIBBONS@NESCA-NEWTON.COM
617-658-9820
60 MAN MAR DRIVE, SUITE 8, PLAINVILLE, MA 02762
55 CHAPEL STREET, SUITE 202, NEWTON, MA 02458