



HOW PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES HELP OUR STUDENTS

by Paul Szego, Ph.D., C.Psych.

Did you know that every school in the TDSB has a few “extra” people supporting their teachers and students? Some of these folks are part of the TDSB Professional Support Services, including all of us in Psychological Services. We are connected to your school, its teachers, and its students... which means we're connected to you!

Many students struggle with school life. School staff have lots of ways to support a student who needs help, but sometimes they may not be able to determine *why* a student is struggling. This is when they – along with you, their caregivers – may reach out to Psychological Services to discuss if we can help.



Students struggle with their school work for many reasons. Some may not understand a new concept, or what they are being asked to do. Others may have a hard time remembering all the things they need to do to complete their work. It can be hard for some students to find the words to show just how well they understand something. For some students, it's difficult to get started and stay focused on their work. And many get overwhelmed with feelings of frustration when things aren't going well.

Doing well in school doesn't only mean getting good grades. Psychological Services can also help students who are struggling with their feelings or with their social situations. For example, even if a student is getting good grades, they may feel so afraid of getting an answer wrong and “looking dumb” that they refuse to raise their hand, talk in class, or even go to school.

We help students, school staff, and caregivers understand why something may be (or may feel) hard to do. We then come up with ways to help students cope with their challenges and recognize their strengths, so they can succeed academically, socially, and emotionally in school. Sometimes, we discover that something is making it extremely difficult for a student to engage in school. For example, we may discover that a student has anxiety (consistent and overwhelming worries), depression (persistent feelings of hopelessness), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a Learning Disability, or Autism.

Seeing and understanding where your child shines and why they struggle is a big part of our job, because it helps us answer the question “How can we help all our students succeed?”

If you want to connect with Psychological Services, please contact your school's Principal.

Here are some other ways we've been supporting our schools & communities lately....

...Leading workshops for TDSB Parents as Partners Virtual Conferences

...Supporting Afghan refugees who attended a TDSB "Welcome gathering" with their families

...Talking with parents about their questions, and concerns, as we return to in-class school

...Working with school staff about ADHD in high school & evidence-based accommodations



MY CHILD WAS JUST DIAGNOSED WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY.... NOW WHAT?

by Monica Apostol, Ph.D., C.Psych.

After learning that your child has a diagnosis of a Learning Disability (LD), you may still wonder how to talk with your child about it. It might be helpful to communicate that **despite the terminology used, learning disabilities are best thought of as learning differences.** Having a learning disability is nothing to be ashamed of, and it is helpful and healthy to talk to your child about their learning differences. The goal is to help the child become the best version of themselves. This is a process that takes time, and neither the caregivers nor their child are expected to understand the LD diagnosis and its implications immediately. Here are a few strategies to support this conversation.

It is important to keep the language at the child's level, and to keep it positive and empowering. [Here are some examples](#) from Dr. Liz Angoff. She defines LD as "a pattern of strengths & challenges that make some types of learning easy to figure out, and others more challenging." It may also be helpful to "[see the world through the eyes](#)" of other children who have learning disabilities, in order to validate your child's challenges and further connect to their areas of strength!

The **psychological report** shared with you describes your child's strengths and challenges, as well as some **concrete ways to help them with their challenges.** Along with their educators, you can apply these strategies to help them understand their learning disability. For instance, a learning disability affecting writing can be explained as "Your brain is built in a way that makes great ideas come easily to you, but it's challenging to write them down."

Try using the word "yet" to frame things positively (as in, "You cannot read well YET"). The "[power of "yet"](#)" gives students a path into their future and makes them feel that they are on a learning journey rather than facing a dead end. Research has shown that the brain can change with appropriate intervention. For example, we know that by using a [reading intervention](#) that is evidence-based and applied early, children can close the gap and learn how to decode and spell words in as little as three to six months.

It is also important to let your child know that they are not alone; many other children and adults have learning disabilities too. People with learning disabilities tend to be innovators and can have other extraordinary skills. And because they have to overcome difficulties, children with LD's can be more resilient and show creative problem-solving skills. Many highly-ranked [professionals and successful individuals](#) indicate that they have become successful *because of* (not in spite of) their learning disability!





HOW TO HELP WITH A NEEDLE PHOBIA

By: Lauren Batho, Ph.D., C.Psych.

Needles are often necessary throughout life, whether for vaccinations, injections, or blood tests. With increased talk about the Covid-19 vaccine recently, it is possible that many children and teens have felt more anxiety about needles in general. When a person's anxiety is so intense that it prevents them from getting important medical interventions (like a vaccination), we call that a Needle Phobia. If your child or adolescent is showing an intense fear of needles, what can you do to help?

- Give them factual information about the needle and discuss why it's important for them (for young children or children with complex needs, using a social story can help).
- Ask them what they are afraid of and help to problem solve (e.g., if they're afraid of pain, consider numbing the area with an ice pack & remind them it is a quick procedure, they can squeeze parents' hand during the procedure, etc.).
- Use distraction during the needle to help put their attention on something more enjoyable (like reading a book, watching a show on a tablet, or snuggling their favourite toy).
- Make positive coping statements: "Even though you're scared, I know you can handle this. I'll be with you the whole time."
- Praise their ability to get the needle ("Wow you were so brave today!") and reward them for facing their fears ("Let's plan a fun activity for after your appointment.").
- Model calm behaviour during the needle (e.g., speak in a calm voice and help your child use calm breathing strategies).

If more support is needed, consider speaking with a mental health worker (e.g., psychologist or social worker). They will help your child face their fears in smaller and easier to handle steps until they work up to getting the needle. For example, a child may read a story about getting a needle, pretend to get a (toy) needle at home, go to the doctor's office/vaccination clinic to sit in the waiting room, and then finally, return to the clinic to get the needle. A mental health worker can also teach your child other helpful strategies such as breathing techniques or using relaxing imagery.

Even though needle fears are very common, with help, your child or adolescent can learn to get needles with less worry!

ASK THE PSYCHOLOGIST

by Michelle Palk, MSW, C. Psy., C. Psych. Assoc.

"How can I help my child deal with grief and loss during Covid-19 (and after)?"

A **loss** is something your child may miss that could return. For example, a child may have missed seeing their friends or teachers during school closures. **Grief** is something more permanent. For example, a child may have experienced the death of a close family member(s) from Covid-19.

Depending on the age of your child, you might notice different reactions, behaviours, and/or feelings because of grief and loss. **Young children (under 5)** might be confused and have a hard time understanding why something changed or why someone is not here anymore. **Older children (ages 6-11)** might want explanations about why the loss happened and start acting like they did when they were younger (e.g., crying when you leave, always wanting to be beside you). **Youth (age 12+)** may have stronger emotions and feel unsure about how they are reacting to the loss (e.g., wondering if it's okay to think about the loss *and* want to go out with friends at the same time?).



Help your child deal with grief and loss:

- Encourage your child to talk to you or a caring adult about who or what they have lost, and how they are feeling.
- The age of your child can help you decide what, and how much, to say about the loss. Concrete explanations are best for younger children (e.g., the body stopped working and we won't see the person again).
- Connect to good memories about what or who is gone (e.g., with story-telling or spiritual practices).
- Show your child how to ask for help and how to cope with strong feelings in healthy ways (such as writing, drawing, exercising, using guided meditation or spiritual practices, etc.).
- Tell your child that it is ok to move forward at their own pace and gradually regain their normal sense of self. Everyone grieves differently, including children and youth.

If you are worried about how your child is dealing with grief or loss, ask TDSB Professional Support Services and/or community professionals for more information about how you can help your child deal with grief and loss.

HELPING YOUR CHILD OR ADOLESCENT MANAGE THEIR ANXIETY WITH SCHOOL AND LIFE

By Patricia Bellantone MSc. (C. Psych. Assoc. Supervised Practise)

Transitioning back to school and adjusting to in-person learning after two challenging school years may feel overwhelming for your child this year. This is on top of the usual transitions that can leave some students feeling anxious, like starting a new grade, meeting new teachers, and adjusting to new routines and environments.

It is natural to want to get rid of your child's anxiety or distress for them. However, it can be more helpful in the long run to teach them strategies that they can practice and use easily and often in moments of fear or distress.

Here are some suggestions for teaching skills in a gradual, patient, and supportive way:



Be mindful of how you are dealing with your own anxiety and stress. Practice compassion for yourself so that your child learns it is okay to be gentle with themselves, too. Remember, **"kids borrow our calm" and we are all doing the best we can!**



Ask your child what might make them feel more calm when they are feeling anxious. Is it a walk? Journaling their thoughts? Click [here](#) for a way to help **comfort, ask questions, relax and distract your child.**



Don't avoid things that make them anxious. Instead, help them to gradually take small steps towards facing their fears. For example, if they are worried about attending school, first go to the school parking lot, and then go up to the front doors, and eventually go inside for longer periods of time



Help your child or adolescent to come up with 'realistic thinking' or copng statements in the face of worries or stress. For example, **"Is this worry a definite or only a maybe? What is your evidence?"**



Assist your child to identify what their body feels like and what their thoughts sound like when they are anxious or stressed. Helping them to be a **'stress detective'** leads to better self-regulation skills! Help them identify how they have used their **inner strengths** to manage stressful things in the past.



Here are ways to notice when anxiety is getting **too big to manage on your own.**

These are the times to connect with additional resources, including your family doctor for support.

CONNECT WITH US!

Parents/Caregivers of Students with Special/Complex Needs:
Virtual Drop-in Hours

Join our Virtual Drop-ins
Wednesdays 7 p.m. – 8 p.m.
www.tdsb.on.ca/virtuallsupport

Connect with our Professional Support Services staff to talk about taking care of yourself as a caregiver and other ideas related to your child's mental health and well-being



Virtual Drop-in hours

Join our Virtual Drop-ins
Tuesdays 10 a.m. – 11 a.m.
Thursdays 7 p.m. – 8 p.m.
www.tdsb.on.ca/virtuallsupport

Connect with Professional Support Services staff to explore ideas related to your child's mental health and well-being



Let's Connect
ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING