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Fostering Joy and Resilience, Countering Anxiety

Honoring the Joy of Childhood is a foundational part of our mission at Charles River School, as it has been for more than a century. While our mission remains a constant, the way we live our lives has changed. When we consider the challenges that children face in today’s fast-paced world, anxiety rises to the top of the list.

With the increase in anxiety young people face today, our goal at CRS has also become one of preserving the joy of childhood for our students. In fact, the...
The Challenge

The statistics surrounding anxiety in youth are staggering. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 31.9% of adolescents aged 13–18 have an anxiety disorder. According to a study published in the Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics in 2018, the prevalence of anxiety increased significantly between 2007 and 2012, and researchers also noted that anxiety in children may actually be under-diagnosed. There are many theories as to why anxiety rates among youth are increasing:

- **TECHNOLOGY** is spending up the pace of life, and demanding that children receive and deliver information more quickly than ever before. The constant barrage of information about current events and issues can create stress levels, and social media is exacerbating the normal teenage struggles with social comparison, as they compare their happiness, life, and physical image to others in Instagram feeds.
- **ACADEMIC AND EXTRACURRICULAR PRESSURES** also seem to be increasing, with parents becoming more involved in and worried about setting their children up for future success.
- Many children are learning fewer **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS** in school or at home and have less free time to play, which serves the critical purpose of putting these intra- and interpersonal skills into action.
- Finally, the **DECREASE IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY** among our children today is depriving them of the natural anti-anxiety effects of exercise.

It’s actually important that children experience some anxiety; it can be motivating and often helps students achieve their goals. However, doubts, and fears are a normal part of life, and it’s natural for children to be anxious about an upcoming test or certain social situations. However, the worrying involved in an anxiety disorder is excessive, intrusive, persistent, and disruptive — beyond “normal” worrying. When anxiety starts to interfere with a child’s life at school or at home and has less free time to play, which serves the critical purpose of putting these intra- and interpersonal skills into action.

The way we think about health and wellness has evolved over the years — from physical activity and what we eat, to encompassing mental health and even personal identity. Our health and wellness program at CRS promotes wellness — in every sense of the word — among students and continues to embrace students’ needs change. Key components of our program include helping students develop resilience, confidence and compassion, social-emotional skills, and physical fitness, as well as helping them gain an understanding of important issues related to their growth, and responsible use of technology and social media.

Our Approach

CRS is intentionally and deliberately designed as a small school, where parents and faculty form strong partnerships, and meaningful relationships exist between teachers and students. The school provides a healthy and balanced environment in which children can face challenges, grow, and learn with support and encouragement. Students understand that their teachers know them as individuals, feel supported, and as a result are able to grow the “start-up” mentality of failing forward. Strong student-teacher relationships help students feel comfortable taking risks both academically and socially, and can lead to greater social-emotional development.

As CRS, our primary strategy for helping students manage anxiety is to let them experience it. Although this may seem counter-intuitive, we don’t shelter students from anxiety-provoking situations. Rather, when they are experiencing anxiety, teachers help them to identify their feelings by asking them to explain how they feel. Once students can identify what they are feeling, students and teachers work together to come up with ideas for how students can help themselves when they are feeling that way.

A Broader Look at Health and Wellness

Resilience is an important word at CRS. Faculty help students build resilience by presenting them with increasingly complex challenges and allowing them to work through those challenges with less and less teacher support and guidance. Students need plenty of low-stakes opportunities to try, fail, and try again to build up their tolerance for both academic and social struggles.

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in which our students flourish. When individuals are truly empathetic, they can identify emotions in themselves and others, take various perspectives in defining a problem or challenge, collaborate successfully with peers, and ultimately grow into compassionate leaders who will build our future.

Growing Resilience

CRS students build resilience through larger-scale projects that challenge their skills appropriately as they move through the grades.

- **STUDENTS IN 1ST AND 2ND GRADES** collaborate to write stories about their animal spirits at the end of a Pacific Northwest Native unit. Teachers set clear guidelines for the project and provide support when necessary, and the students must put forth their own ideas and listen to the input of their partners in order to create a collaborative final draft.

- **IN 5TH GRADE**, using Stanford University’s Design Thinking Process, students each create their own “Passion Project.” The project is completely student-directed, and through it students are figuring out which skills they need to solve problems they faced. This year’s topics included building a robot that draws, planning and filming a cooking show, and creating an informational blog for siblings of children with autism. This project cultivates a wide range of skills from executive function to technology to writing.

- **IN 8TH GRADE**, every student chooses a topic for research—ranging from animals facing extinction to the story of the lost boys and girls of Sudan. They use a variety of resources to research their topics, identify and interview someone with specific knowledge of their topic, and develop thesis statements that they defend in both a written research paper and a TED Talk-style presentation.

**Signs of Anxiety**

- Agitation
- Restlessness
- Inattention, poor focus
- Somatic symptoms like headaches or stomachaches
- Avoidance
- Tantrums
- Crying
- Refusing to go to school
- Meltdowns before school about clothing, hair, shoes, socks
- Meltdowns after school about homework
- Difficulties with transitions within school, and between school and an activity/sport
- Difficulty settling down for bed
- Having high expectations for school work, homework and sports performance
- Source: Anxiety.org

**Tips for Helping Your Child Manage an Anxiety Disorder**

- Pay attention to your child’s feelings.
- Stay calm when your child becomes anxious about a situation or event.
- Recognize and praise small accomplishments.
- Don’t punish mistakes or lack of progress.
- Be flexible, but try to maintain a normal routine.
- Modify expectations during stressful periods.
- Plan for transitions (For example, allow extra time in the morning if getting to school is difficult).
- Source: Anxiety & Depression Association of America

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8th grader Max Heredia delivers his TED-style talk on the lost boys and girls of Sudan, one of the larger-scale projects that help students build resilience and think bigger.