

Practical Strategies to Support Elementary School-Aged Children with School Attendance

November 19, 2020

Speakers

Sarah Anderson, PhD, RPsych, Julie Collette, RCC, & Paula Foran, RCC

Panelists

Rosalind Catchpole, PhD, RPsych

A Collaboration Between

BC Children's Hospital, Vancouver Child & Youth Mental Health, The Vancouver School Board, & Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre



Welcome! We will begin the presentation shortly. Please note that your microphones have been muted automatically.

Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre



- We help families across the province by:
- Helping with understanding and navigating the mental health system
- Listening and offering peer support, and
- Connecting families to resources and tools.

Before We Begin...

- This information applies to the context in British Columbia. Some information is specific to the Vancouver School Board. If you are in another jurisdiction please consult local health and school authorities for further information.
- If you/your child, or someone you care about is having a mental health or substance use crisis: Call [911](#) or go to your local hospital's emergency room

Housekeeping

- Attendees are automatically muted and cameras are turned off.
- Please submit technical questions or comments through the “Chat” function.
- The webinar will be recorded.
- At the end of the webinar, a survey will pop up that we invite you to complete.
- Please submit questions for the speakers through the “Q&A” function. If you wish to remain anonymous, before submitting your question change your name via zoom

Overview of Webinar Series

Part 1

Challenges with School Attendance:
Introduction for Parents & Caregivers

Part 2 is split by age

Practical Strategies to Support School
Attendance in:

- Elementary School-Aged Children (Today!)
- High School-Aged Youth (Nov 23)

To register for part 2B, visit
<https://keltymentalhealth.ca/VSBWebinarSeries>

Land Acknowledgments

Speakers and panelist acknowledge with immense gratitude that they live, work, and play on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the xʷməθkwəʔəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səlíl̓wətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation.



Speakers Today

Sarah Anderson, PhD, RPsych (she/her)

Post-doctoral Fellow, Mood & Anxiety Disorders Clinic
BC Children's Hospital & UBC Psychiatry



Julie Collette, MC, RCC (she/her)

VCH CYMH Hospital & School Liaison Clinician



Paula Foran, MEd, RCC (she/her)

VSB District Counsellor, Mental Health



Panelist Today



Rosalind Catchpole, PhD, RPsych (she/her)

Psychologist and Clinic Head, Mood & Anxiety Disorders
Clinic, BC Children's Hospital

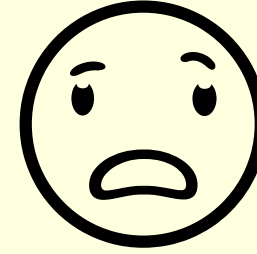


WHAT ARE WE COVERING TODAY?

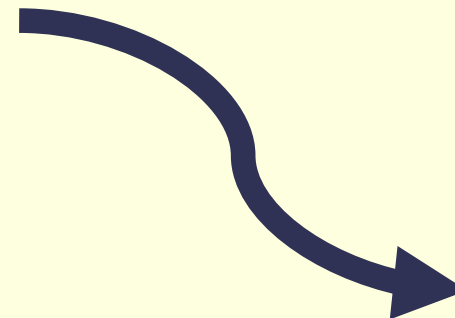


- What is anxiety and how does it impact kids?
- How to set kids with heightened anxiety up for success
- Identifying supports and building a team
- Effectively harnessing support from your child's school
- Concrete steps to support your child's school attendance
- Q&A

WHAT IS ANXIETY?



- a **NORMAL & NECESSARY** human experience
- Uncomfortable (sometimes **VERY** uncomfortable) but not **HARMFUL**



False alarm!



Anxiety during Elementary School-Age

- Common types of worries include...
 - Worries about friendships
 - Difficulties being away from parents
 - Worries about academics
 - Difficulties speaking up in class
- Which may be complimented by...
 - Sleep difficulties
 - Social challenges or stressors
 - Learning differences or academic difficulties
 - Problematic screen use
 - Challenges with attention and/or concentration
 - Cultural and/or language considerations

All of which can contribute to school non-attendance!

There's a Spectrum

Attends
regularly
with distress

Misses full or
partial days
once in a
while

Regularly
misses full
or partial
days

Misses
multiple full
days or weeks
at a time

Hasn't
attended
for months
or more

Step 1: Take Stock

- What areas is my child doing well in? (e.g., sleep, physical activity, friendships, academics) Are any of these areas ones that my child is struggling in?
- How often is my child getting to school?
- What is / was going on around the time that it was harder to get to school?
- How distressed am I / is my child when it's time to go to school?
- What am I / my child doing when they're not at school?
- Who is on my and my child's 'team' (i.e., school staff, friends/family, mental health clinician [if applicable], doctor, etc.)

Your
Team

Spiritual
leaders

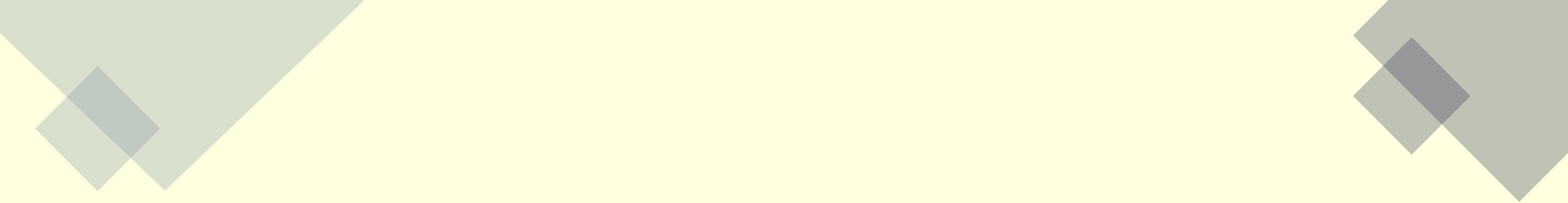
Friends &
family
Neighbors &
other parents

After
school
care staff


Healthcare
professionals

Teachers,
coaches,
tutors, youth
workers

Parent
Support
Groups

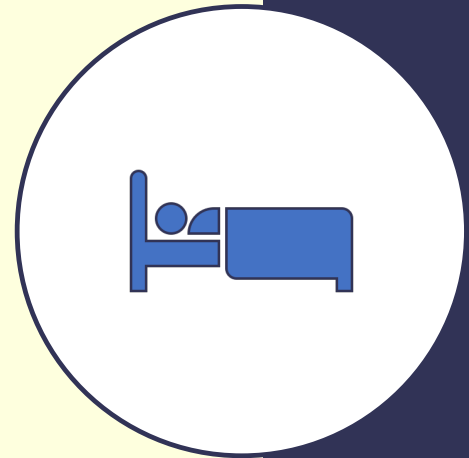


Step 2: Setting the Stage

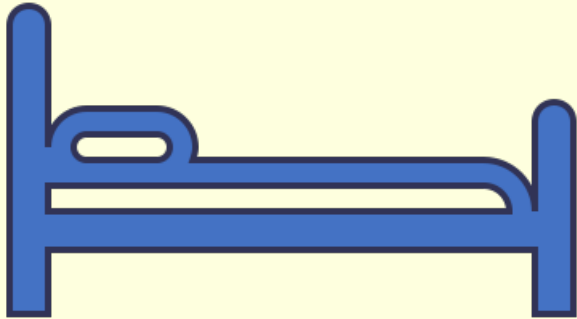
- What are those areas that I can address in advance to set my child up for success?
 - Sleep
 - Physical activity
 - Screen use
 - Anxiety-management tips
- 

Setting the Stage – Sleep

- When is your child starting their bedtime routine, falling asleep, and waking up?
- Strategies to support healthy sleep:
 - Sleep environment cool, dark, and quiet
 - Bed only for sleeping (i.e., not play-time, homework time)
 - Avoid stimulation before bed (intense physical activity, screens)
 - **Consistent** sleep and wake times (within 30-60 minutes on the weekends)



Sleep Challenges – How to Help



- Gradual independence
- Bedtime tickets
- Gradually facing bedtime fears
- Reward system

Setting the Stage – Physical Activity

- Elevates mood
- Decreases anxiety
- Elevates energy
- Helps kids regulate their bodies
- Recommendation = at least 1 hour/day of activity such as playing, running, bike riding etc.



Setting the Stage – Screen Use

- First, understand your child's usage
 - How much time is your child on screens (TV, phone, computer, other electronic device) each day?
 - How are they using screens (for school? For productive play? For social media?)
 - Do you have family guidelines about screen use (amount and type)?
- If usage is problematic, develop a plan to help
 - Setting limits
 - Set 'no tech' times
 - Develop a tech contract
 - Model healthy usage



Setting the Stage – Tips To Manage Anxiety

- Gentle encouragement for facing fears in small steps
- Practice, practice, practice!

- Rewards for following the plan
- Stickers, small amount of \$, special activity

- Praise and positive reinforcement for “successes” (e.g., being brave)
- Be specific!

- ‘Ignore’ mild anxious behaviours

- Regular & predictable routines, structure, and consistent responses

Step 3 – Talk to your Child's School

- Reach out **as soon as you identify a problem**
 - Personnel involved in supporting students include teachers, resource teachers, support staff, counsellors, administrators
 - Information is helpful to the school to provide appropriate context and supports
 - The school will determine what level of support is needed while teachers use universal classroom strategies that support emotional safety

My Child's School Based Team

- Classroom teachers initially access the child's school based team (SBT)
- SBT considers learning complexities, social, emotional and behaviour supports and challenges that may be impacting school experience
- Recommendations could include small group or individual supports including assessments, academic testing, school counselling or outside referrals
- Your child may or may not have an individual education plan to support attendance

What to Expect

Caregiver/School Meeting Goals:

- Collaboration with family, school and other mental health and/or medical health professionals is critical to supporting school attendance
- Creation of an individualized plan for appropriate supports like environmental changes, developing a 'Plan B', check in/out system
- Development of realistic attendance and academic goals

Step 4 – Make a Plan (& Follow Through!)

- Coordinate with the school on a good plan to slowly increase your child's time at school
- Tailor to child's specific strengths and stretches
- Initial goals may include:
 - Visit outside the school
 - See a friend during recess
 - Connect with a trusted school staff member
 - Join class for 30 minutes



Spectrum of School Attendance

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a time

Hasn't
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for months
or more

Spectrum of Intervention/Support

'Setting the
stage'
strategies and
speak with
school

AND
implement a
prevention plan
with school

AND
implement an
intervention
plan with
school

AND consider
involving
other
professionals

Coordinated
and intensive
approach with
professional
support

Speaking with your Child about Goal-Setting for School Attendance



Identify components of school that child is motivated to attend (e.g., to see friends, participate in gym class, etc.)

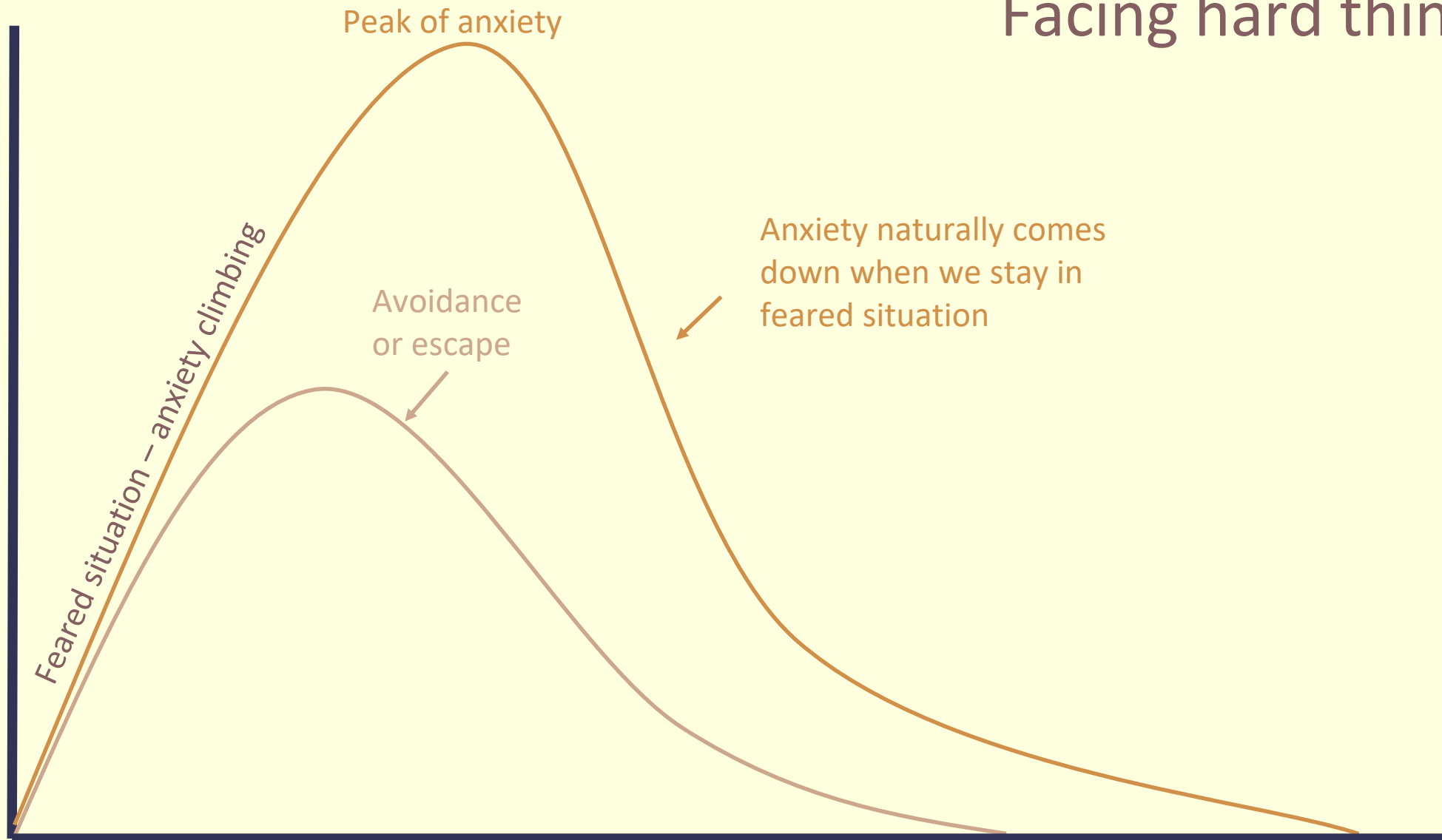


Collaborate with them to set goals for attending school (realistic goals vs non-negotiables)



What to say: "Thanks for telling me you don't want to go to school – I hear you that you really don't like it! Remember when you told me that want to decorate your holiday craft with your friends? How about we work together to being there for that?"

Facing hard things



The first time we try something hard...

Anxiety improves when we keep facing hard things



The second time we try something hard...



Example School Attendance Ladder

- ☐ Visit school grounds and meet teacher(s)
- ☐ Attend school for 30 mins w/o expectations to complete schoolwork ("audit mode")
- ☐ Attend school for 30 mins
- ☐ Attend school for 45 mins
- ☐ Attend school for 1 hour
- ☐ ... Continue to titrate up to full amount of expected in-person schooling

REMEMBER:

Rewards and praise for each step



Spend roughly a few days at each step

Helpful vs. Unhelpful Things to Say

Helpful/Outside Voice

- I know how difficult this is for you, AND I know you can do it. Let's walk to the car together.
- I can see you're really trying – I'm so proud of you for getting your backpack ready.

Unhelpful/Inside Voice

- You were able to go to school yesterday. I'm really late and need to go!
- I'm disappointed that you've been missing so much school... when I was in school that wasn't even an option!

Remember: Validate child's concerns about school attendance **AND communicate confidence in their ability to attend**

What if My Child is at Home?

- Home environment should not be fun during school hours
 - No access to electronics, treats, special privileges, extra attention
- If your child continues to be motivated to stay home, be vigilant for inadvertent reinforcers (e.g., parent working from home sharing a hot lunch with child, child allowed to play quietly with toys in their room)

Who is Responsible for What?

- **Caregiver** is responsible for:
 - Communicating confidence in their child
 - Making sure the home setting is **boring** during school hours
 - Ensuring child is getting enough sleep and awake in time to attend school
- **Child** is responsible for:
 - Being brave and going to school
- **School** (counsellor, case manager, support team, etc.) is responsible for:
 - Supporting and developing a school re-integration plan or Individualized Education Plan/IEP (if needed)
 - Setting up school team meetings with all players
 - Liaising with mental health clinician
- **Mental health clinician** (if applicable) is responsible for:
 - Providing individual therapy and/or parent training
 - Consulting with school team to develop school re-integration plans and/or IEPs, as needed; attending school team meetings

Step 5 – Getting Additional Support

- Parents may want additional support from a mental health clinician to help manage challenging school nonattendance, such as:
 - Setting appropriate expectations (*step-by-step plan*)
 - Setting contingencies for attendance and avoidance of school
 - Limiting any reinforcement for non-attendance (*no wifi in the day!*)
 - Responding to anxiety-driven behaviour effectively
- Here to Help; Employee & Family Assistance Program; Child & Youth Mental Health

When Does my Child need Additional Support?

- Additional mental health challenges, engagement and interest in therapy, etc.
- Reach out to your local Child & Youth Mental Health (CYMH) team
- Individual support may include:
 - Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for anxiety
 - Other therapies such as behavioural activation, social skills training, executive functioning skills training
- Medical management of mental health challenges (severe anxiety, OCD, depression, ADHD)
- Medical support for physical health conditions that led to school nonattendance (chronic pain, asthma, chronic health condition, etc.)



Take Home Messages...

- Facing fears is hard but not harmful
- Identifying your 'team' members is key
- You are an essential part of supporting your child's school attendance
- Expect some anxiety!
- Reach out for help if you need it
- It can and it will get better!

Resources

- Confident Parents Thriving Kids <https://welcome.cmhacptk.ca/>
- Kelty Mental Health Webinar (on YouTube) 'Setting Children & Youth up for a Successful Return to School in the Era of COVID-19' <https://youtu.be/4ZW6Ojq2uuU>
- 'Treating Childhood and Adolescent Anxiety: A Guide for Caregivers' by Eli Lebowitz and Haim Omer <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/collection/keltys-recommended-resources-anxiety-parentscaregiver>
- Anxiety Canada (formerly AnxietyBC) <https://www.anxietycanada.com/>
- Kelty Mental Health <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/>
- Screen use - <https://www.drshimikang.com/>

Questions?

**Questions for the
speakers?**

**Please use the
“Q&A” icon**



Thank-You!!

Thank-you for joining.

Contact the Kelty Mental Health
Resource Centre:

e-mail: keltycentre@cw.bc.ca

phone (toll-free): 1-800-665-1822

