

Andrew Fuller

Clinical Psychologist
Author and Speaker

www.andrewfuller.com.au
www.mylearningstrengths.com



Converting Neurodiversity into Neuro-advantage Students with Anxiety

Andrew Fuller

When anxiety effects fairly neurotypical kids, some become 'chatty & scatty' while others become 'broody & moody.' Applying neurotypical interventions to neurodivergent kids rarely works. We need to be more tailored in our approaches. About 30% of school students are neurodivergent.

Unfortunately, neurodivergent kids are much more susceptible to being afflicted by anxiety & when they are, they have distinctive needs in order to calm down & process their thinking & learning.

While neurodivergent kids are often incredibly fearless & courageous in dealing with life, their big area of vulnerability is anxiety.

It can take over their lives. Neurodivergent kids often feel overwhelmed & paralysed by anxiety. They can spend long periods of time huddled away trying desperately to avoid situations that provoked their anxious feelings. Left unmanaged it can severely limit what they can do in their lives.

Unmanaged anxiety hits our body even more powerfully than our minds. It suppresses our immune system, disrupts our sleep patterns, depletes our energy levels, & restricts our motivation to a few 'safe' activities. Anxiety also causes changes in learning & information processing in our brains.

Converting Neurodiversity into Neuro-advantage

We need to help all young people to understand how their brains work. Developing this understanding in neurodivergent kids helps them to know that differences are not disadvantages.

Implied in many diagnostic categories is what people can't do. Instead let's consider some of the often remarkable abilities of these kids-

Imagination- anxiety is often a great imagination turned towards fear & dread.

Resilience- coping with being 'different' requires strength.

Cautiousness- A Broome pearling industry saying is, 'There are old divers & there are bold divers but there are no, old, bold divers'.

Sometimes it pays to heed the signals of anxiety & to be careful rather than reckless.

Kindness- Knowing how harsh the world can be gives insight into how difficult life can be for many people. Being kind is the basis of people smarts, quality relationships & a good life.

How Parents Can Help

Generally speaking, anxiety is a signal, a 'call to do something'- it mobilises us & lets us know something in our world is scary & requires changing. Anxiety only really becomes a problem for most of us when we don't use that signal to do anything with it.

We can use our knowledge of your child's learning strengths not only to help them to learn more effectively but also to calm down & recover rapidly. Let's start with what is strong rather than what is 'wrong'.

Parents can complete the analysis of learning strengths at www.mylearningstrengths.com either with their child or on their behalf & use the free letter to start a conversation about building on their identified strengths. Discuss these with your child's teacher(s). A full report is also available outlining strategies, strengths, & possible future career areas.

Learning strengths can help neurodivergent kids to understand that they have some areas where they perform well but also have some areas that are more challenging. This is helpful in many areas of their life & is especially useful in helping them manage their anxieties about assessments at schools.

Many neurodivergent young people feel terrified & panic in tests & exams or freeze when called upon in class. This can make some avoidant of school. Others incorrectly assume that they are not clever & cannot be successful. Another group decide that if they can't be successful academically, they will pursue social success as the class clown or the cutest, most vulnerable kid in class.

This can cause some adults to respond by trying to be kind but inadvertently treating your child as less capable than they truly are.

Helping these kids (& their teachers) to identify & build upon their learning strengths increases self-belief & feelings that they can succeed.

Let's look at some of the main learning strength areas in terms of learning & calming.

Spatial Reasoning

Thinking in pictures & symbols is a learning strength that is especially worthy of development in kids who suffer from anxiety.

Stress particularly inhibits our production of language & words. If you have ever been 'shocked speechless' you may know this.

Being able to communicate information visually rather than verbally helps anxious kids to experience success.

These kids will also recover from anxiety more quickly when they use their learning strengths. When we focus on what we are good at & strong at, we calm. Colouring in, mapping, drawing, doodling, designing & even body mapping their feelings will help calm them.

Perceptual-Motor Skills

These kids absorb knowledge powerfully when they learn it physically or sensorily. These are sensitive people who are attuned to their sensory inputs. Helping them to attend to pleasant as well as fearful feelings is an important way of helping them develop confidence & motivation.

Performance anxiety & embarrassment can stifle the development of this learning strength. Help these kids to develop & practice skills away from the gaze & judgement of peers.

Help neurodivergent kids to calm their anxiety by learning interoception or how to attend to & interpret the signals from our body. Many find repetition, ritual & specified calming places in school & at home to help. Others find weighted blankets or deep pressure on their body helps.

Some will seek out sensations in order to calm, others will avoid sensation & need time alone & yet others will become overstimulated & distract others. Finding what textures, colours, aromas, or movements are calming for a neuro-divergent kid helps.

Everyone uses calming movements to settle themselves. You may have seen someone who is feeling stressed rubbing the back or their neck or behind their ears & then sighing deeply in order to calm themselves.

Some neurodivergent kids do this in more noticeable ways such as large gestures or flapping of their hands. These are important calming methods for them & should not be discouraged.

Concentration and memory

It is hard to focus in school when you feel terrified or preoccupied by what others may think of you. Anxiety, left unchecked, plays havoc with learning strengths in concentration & memory.

As keen as some of these kids are to be accepted by friends, help them to view school as primarily about learning & friendships, if need be, can occur elsewhere.

Helping 'chatty & scatty' kids pick out the most important aspects of a topic is a learning strength worth developing. 'Moody & broody' kids can be helped to develop the skills of note-making. Both groups can develop their memory to high levels.

Splashing your face with cold water or placing your hands into a basin of warm water helps some kids. Sound reduction- by using noise cancelling earbuds can help focus. Other kids find their concentration is best after doing 'heavy work' such as pulling, pushing, or lifting some weights & using their large muscles.

Planning and sequencing

Many anxious kids fail tests before they even take them. They over-plan & anticipate every possible difficulty. Disasters loom large. Fears of failure hound them.

Usually, uncertainty & ambiguity amplify anxiety. Help them to make systematic, realistic plans where they can take the steps towards success. Goals can heighten anxiety for these kids, systems & rituals calm them.

Help them not to get ahead of themselves. Anticipatory thinking often predicts humiliation

& feeds a sense of dread. Catch them when they are mentally focusing on the future & gently direct them back to the present & to the plans they have made. Ask, 'What is the next step to do?'

Developing a learning strength in planning & sequencing helps anxious kids to base their actions on logical steps that relate to desired outcomes rather than on their current feelings & preoccupations.

Neurodivergent kids may need to start by locating where in their own body they feel worried or strong & focused. Progressive relaxation can appeal to these kids.

Planning is the art of prediction. Help them to plan for good outcomes not just bad ones.

If events become overwhelming it is always good to have an escape plan, ideally to a chill out spot or a person they trust.

Thinking and logic

Most neurodivergent kids can think things through. However, some develop 'sticky' brains where they get stuck on their thoughts.

Helping anxious kids learn the scientific method advantages them greatly. Simply put, this is:

1. Gather together data (what you know)
 2. Form a best idea (a hypothesis)
 3. Test out your idea. This may include evaluating threats.
 4. Ask, 'Is the hypothesis still the best idea?'
 5. Make a conclusion
- This circumvents their endless repetitive thinking or only basing their thinking on their feelings.

Distraction, chess, Rubik's cubes, mindfulness, puzzles & trail making, activities like joining the dots or walking a labyrinth can calm these kids.

People smarts.

These kids are so tuned into other people they almost never calm by themselves. They require interactions with someone they trust to calm.

Anxious kids often fear negative evaluations by others. This makes it hard for them to utilize feedback & make changes.

Developing learning strengths in people smarts contributes greatly to the success of neurodivergent kids. As some view the world as potentially hostile, working out who can be trusted & who is a threat is a process of reading others well. It is also important to learn that feelings of anxiety are signals but are not always accurate.

Singing, humming, chanting, becoming a 'feeling detective', matching someone else's movements & breathing patterns can help. Patting a pet & walking & talking are invaluable.

Language and word smarts

At times, we are all quite good at creating disaster scenarios that can feature in our own imaginary, personal horror show. Neurodivergent kids are often especially adept at imagining the worst possible outcomes.

Anxiety can leave even the most articulate of us stumbling & mumbling. Helping neurodivergent kids to communicate their ideas & feelings through drawing, poetry, songs, writing, music, video, or dance will help build this area.

Performance anxiety, including speaking in public, inhibits the development of this learning strength. Ideally we begin overcoming this in childhood by providing opportunities to be involved in performances in practical non-speaking roles & gradually increasing their level of participation & verbal contributions.

Stories, fear busting methods, reading & developing conversational skills are all helpful.

Number smarts

Generally, this is the learning strength area with the largest barrier for anxious kids. Around 17% of people suffer high levels of mathematics anxiety.

Quite a few neurodivergent kids, however, find the solidity of numbers to be comforting. It's almost as if, when some of them think in numbers they don't need to deal with all that confusing 'feeling stuff.'

Using rating scales such as asking, '*On a scale of 1 to 10 if 10= the worst, where are you right now?*'

Using numbers to tune neuro-divergent kids back to the range of their feels can be useful.

For example, see if you can notice:

6 things you can *see*.

5 things you can *hear*.

4 things you can *smell*.

3 things you could *touch*.

2 things you can *taste*.

1 *feeling* you have (other than anxiety)

Next steps

Schools could ask parents & students to complete the assessment of learning strengths & use this as a basis for collective planning over the next term. This could also be integrated with career planning for senior students.

Schools could also consider hosting professional development sessions on neurodivergence & learning strengths to consider ways of building on the strengths of all students.

It is essential that we regard neurodivergence as a strength rather than as a deficit & applaud, support, build the strengths of all of our wonderful young people.

More information

Email-

inyahead@aussiebb.com.au

Andrew's website

www.mylearningstrengths.com has helped over 100,000 young people to discover their learning strengths.

Linked in

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/andrew-fuller-2238a325/>

On face book:

andrewfullerpsychologist
Learning Strengths

Books for Parents

Unlocking Your Child's Genius

Tricky Behaviours

The A to Z of Feelings

Tricky Conversations. (Amba Press)

Book for Teachers

Guerrilla Tactics for Teachers

Neurodevelopmental Differentiation- Optimising Brain Systems To Maximise Learning (Amba press).

