

'I get by with a little help from my FRIENDS!'

20% of students are suffering with anxiety that diminishes their quality of life



Anxiety in kids can be overcome

A pioneering Australian program is helping to calm anxious kids before they become troubled teens, as Deborah Arentz reports. Anxiety among children is on the rise in Australia affecting pre-schoolers through to adolescents and it is slowly draining the joy from young lives, according to our psychological experts. Worse still, if it is left untreated, childhood anxiety tends to morph into adolescent depression, becoming a strong risk factor for youth suicide.

To fight the problem, Australian psychologist Dr Paula Barrett, the Director of the Pathways Health and Research Centre in Brisbane, has developed a program which is helping children cope with their fears.

Dr Barrett designed FRIENDS, a course which is used widely in Australian hospitals, clinics and in a growing number of schools to treat anxious children and depressed adolescents.

Whatever the causes and there are many including the decline of the extended family, overemphasis on achievement and a general speeding up of life are all possibilities – it's estimated that between 15% and 20% of kids feel anxiety that diminishes the quality of their lives.

Put simply, these children spend too much time worrying, ruining what should be their most carefree years. Instead of looking forward to a school camp, for example, they fret about what might go wrong, like being served food they don't like or having to shower in front of others.

And while teenagers are openly affected, the saddest news is that anxiety is a condition showing up in younger and younger children and Dr Barrett is now working on a course aimed at pre-schoolers.

It seems that even the little child playing quietly with her blocks may be thinking thoughts no-one could have imagined. Worse, sufferers feel compelled to conceal their fears from everyone and often grow into depressed teens.

'Anxious children are too rarely brought to us,' Dr Barrett said. 'But the course, offered in both primary and secondary schools, is aimed at preventing anxiety.'

'FRIENDS stands for: *Feeling worried? – Relax – Inner thought – Explore plans – Nice work, reward – Don't forget to practice – Stay calm*, and it is taking off.

'By helping young people to accept their feelings as legitimate and showing them techniques of positive thinking and problem solving, the program is building their emotional resilience.'

Dr Barrett, who is also an Adjunct Professor of the School of Education at the University of Queensland, said that FRIENDS was unique and has an outstanding record of achievement.

Hundreds of Australian schools have used the program and by the end of 2006 well over 100 000 children had completed a FRIENDS program worldwide.

The course has reached children in New Zealand, South Africa, the U.S. and Europe and Canadian schools are soon to begin a large trial of the program. It will also be translated later this year into Chinese and Russian.

In the 1990s, as Barrett was drawing on work by American psychologist Phillip Kendall to design FRIENDS, researchers were fine-tuning their theories on the types of children most prone to anxiety. Those experts now believe that one in every five children is born with, as Barrett describes it: 'a physiological sensitivity to stress and certain stimuli.'



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As an example, an anxiety test given to three-month-old babies being held by their mothers when exposed to a sudden noise, revealed that the heart rate of the sensitive child rises higher and more quickly than the average child and it remains elevated for longer.

But for every five sensitive kids (who tend to be smart and artistic), three won't develop problems with anxiety. Their secret, explains Barrett, is certain 'protective factors.' At the top of this list is parenting style: the sensitive child whose parents are encouraging and optimistic generally rises above a predisposition towards anxiety.

On the other hand, a child with the double whammy of physiological sensitivity and negative parents whose favored approach to problems is to avoid them 'is going to be a bit of a mess,' says Barrett.

'Sensitive kids desperately need the parent who says: 'Yes, there are some dangerous things, but we can learn to cope with them and generally the world is a pretty good place.'

'In the past few years, researchers have become convinced that other things can help prevent children from lapsing into anxiety, including a school environment that is welcoming and puts participation above achievement and a network of good friends.'

Be a friend – get involved

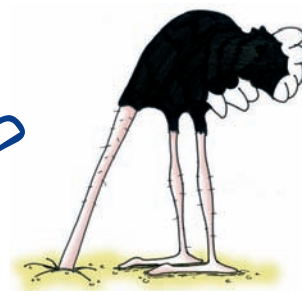
There are two FRIENDS courses in schools, one aimed at children aged 7–11, the other at youth aged 12–16 years. A resource CD and professional development is also available for teachers. Workshops are held regularly throughout the school year. When the program is implemented at the school level, 10 sessions are run over as many weeks, teachers introduce children to 'thought terminators' to fight negative thinking and a six-step plan to beat problems that may seem insurmountable is introduced.

Specialist support is also available to parents.

FRIENDS does not require specialist staff, but can simply be run by teachers in normal class times. It does not involve any clinical assessment or diagnosis and avoids labelling children as anxious or different. The program is consistently described as a rewarding teaching experience that encourages the sharing of positive emotions. FRIENDS is the only childhood anxiety prevention program acknowledged by the World Health Organization for its eight years of comprehensive evaluation and practice.

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