

**Lauren 00:11**

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series dedicated to improving the lives and education of all learners. This week we talked to Dr. Beverly Johns, the president elect of LDA Illinois, about the rise of anxiety in the classroom, and discuss strategies for teachers and parents to use to help anxiety prone children.

**Kristina Scott 00:35**

Hello everyone, I'm here with Dr. Beverly Johns from MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois. Dr. Johns has been an active member of Learning Disability Association for many years serving as the previous state president, the state presidents rep, and currently as the president elect of LDA Illinois. She's very active in the Healthy Children Project, she has over 35 years of special education experience in the public schools in Illinois. She's now a professional fellow at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois, and is a learning and behavior consultant. She is the author of over 20 books in the area of special education and working with children with challenging behaviors. Thank you for joining us today Bev.

**Bev Johns 01:15**

I'm delighted to be here, delighted to be here.

**Kristina Scott 01:18**

Right. So we're seeing a rise in the mental health concerns in our pre K through 12 students. Why do you think that is?

**Bev Johns 01:25**

Well, it is interesting, because we do see that anxiety disorders is the fastest growing mental health concern across the United States. What is happening is one, I think we live in such a rushed society, and everybody wants to get things done, and they want to get them done quickly. And therefore as a result of that, we have an increased need for instant gratification. And then the other thing is that we can't ignore the fact that all of the social media has resulted in some children feeling very isolated. Because while they're tied to the computer, they're not learning social skills and how to get along with other people, and how to deal with their stress. And dealing with their stress is something that we have to teach them, otherwise, they're not going to know it themselves. The other thing is that we have a lot more pressures on children, now, we live in a competitive world. So children are concerned about getting the best grades, doing well on tests, doing well in sports. And it's a competitive society. Rather than looking at growth in the individual child, which I wish that we could do more of is focus on what that child's needs are as opposed to the whole competitive 'are you better than the next person,' kind of the one up-manship. And that has put a lot of pressure on students.

**Kristina Scott 03:21**

So it sounds like our students today are under a lot of stress. So how can we as adults alleviate some of that stress?

**Bev Johns 03:27**

Yes, and I think it's sometimes difficult for adults, because we're role models for children. And yet at the same time that children are under stress, we're under stress. If you just look, for instance, at school

personnel, you know, they feel pressured to make sure that the children do well on tests. They need to get all of their paperwork done. They're facing working in the schools and raising a family and worrying about money, etc. So school folks are under a great deal of stress. Parents, particularly parents who have any child with special needs, are worried because they're afraid that it's a reflection on them if their children are not doing well. And they're also trying to meet the demands of raising a family, going to work, getting everything done, wondering where the next paycheck is going to come from. So there's just a lot of pressure out there. And it's pressure to keep up with other people. And it's the pressure about worrying about what other people think about them. So it's a competitive society with adults as well as children. Well, what happens is then children see the parent or the educator being stressed out, and oftentimes that person just can't deal with all of this stress that is coming at them. And then that makes the children more stressed. So I said it's just like the snowball effect. So people are pressured at one hand, and then it just impacts everybody until it gets to the child, and the child is very concerned about it. Because the key for parents and educators is to remember they're role models. And they have to learn to emotionally regulate themselves, so that they model how to do that with children, because children don't pick that up on their own, they have to be taught those skills. And so therefore, the adults in their lives have to be the ones who teach them those skills, through modeling and through co-regulating with them through using a variety of strategies.

**Kristina Scott** 06:00

So it sounds like the adults in the world that are stressed, oftentimes, the children pick up on that stress, and they take it on themselves.

**Bev Johns** 06:07

Exactly. They do, they do.

**Kristina Scott** 06:10

And then I guess you say that the adults should model how to self regulate, how do we explicitly teach that to children?

**Bev Johns** 06:17

Right, well, the first thing that we have to do is never assume that children just automatically know how to do that. They have to be taught and they have to be taught first, by co-regulating wisdom. So for instance, when we see the child is stressed, or where we're stressed, we may need to teach them some deep breathing activities, we maybe want to teach them things that are what we call cognitive distractions. In other words, let's move to another activity, or let's change the topic. And if you stop and think about it, adults spend a lot of money on going to yoga classes, or going to stretching classes, or whatever that helps them to regulate. And we need to teach children, those deep breathing and closing their eyes and thinking of something that makes them happy in their lives.

**Kristina Scott** 07:26

So if I have a worrier in my class, as a teacher, how do I get them to stop the worrying? Is it cognitive distractors? Is it something else I need? Is it something I can say to them?

**Bev Johns** 07:40

I think that first of all we have to learn, the adults need to learn what the triggers are for the children. And then help the children identify those triggers, so that they can do better. For instance, in a classroom, it might be certain words that trigger you know, something worrying, or the first thing we have to do is know our children, and all of the barriers and what I call the emotional baggage that they're coming into the classroom with, because a lot of our children are coming in with a lot of baggage. Certainly, some of our children are coming to school having been abused, well, then we have to be careful about just the simple act of laying a hand on them to comfort them, it may not comfort them at all, it might be very difficult for them to take. And then we also have to remember that not only do our children have trouble emotionally regulating, but they have something that we call the lack of cognitive flexibility, meaning the ability for them to move from one activity to another. So that's why we want to do one step directions. So we're not giving them multiple things to do at one time, because multiple things to do at one time, regardless of their age, are very difficult for them. And then we need to make sure that our directions are clear. And then we need to speak slowly because a lot of work is now being done with children who have anxiety, who have auditory processing deficits, because if you're worried about a lot of things, you're going to have problems, you know, attending to a task. So we have to remember that they're going to have trouble auditorily processing information. That's why we want to do one step directions in the classroom. One of the big concerns that I see with children is that we switch activities and we switch activities fast. And sometimes our children can't move from PE class to math, because that's just too big of a jump. So we might need to build in an intermediate step. So for instance, rather than going right from PE to math, maybe we can go from PE to doing an active activity in math, that involves some body movement. The other problems that I see are with worksheets. I just have some real issues, if you have problems with cognitive flexibility, a lot of our worksheets today, switch directions on one sheet of paper six times. Well, a child who has got problems switching gears can't do that. And so then we say they are separate. When it's an issue they can't move from one direction to another. Or the other thing we do in worksheets is let's just take mathematics as an example, not only do we have six sets of directions on one sheet of paper, which is just, which is what I call circuit overload for a child with anxiety, it's going to cause them a lot of anxiety. But think about it, then sometimes we have math problems that go from left to right, and then we go top to bottom. And then maybe we throw a word problem in there. Those are very, very difficult for children. So I say to teachers, don't put more than one direction on a sheet of paper at a time. Because otherwise, you're really causing, just by the worksheet itself, you're causing that child to have more anxiety and sometimes we just don't think about those things. The other thing is, I think parents and educators tend to say to children, hurry up, hurry up and get all of that done. The problem with telling a child with anxiety to hurry up is they could do it if they could do it, and they can't do it. And it isn't that they won't, it's that they can't do it. And so recognizing that when you say the words hurry up, you're causing more anxiety for a child.

### **Bev Johns 07:53**

Timers are another example, we say to children, you have five minutes to do this, that in itself is going to cause anxiety for some children. It's probably much better to say, in math, do two more problems, or in reading answer one more question, or if you're an art teacher, finish painting with this one color. So it's those little things that can really make a big difference for a child, and can avoid a lot of stress and anxiety that they might be feeling. And then we know about children who have trouble with tests. I was working with a student one day, and this is an older student. And she was so anxious because she had

put so much pressure on herself. She had to do well on the test. You know, she had this goal. And if she didn't do well on the test, she wasn't going to be able to meet her goal. She spelled her own name wrong. Yeah, I mean, and those things break your heart. So you want to, you know, so I always say also with tests, we could reduce some anxiety if we taught our children how to take tests, how to take tests, test-taking strategies. There are lots of well researched test-taking strategies that are out there for students as well, and test taking is a skill, it is a skill. That's right.

**Kristina Scott** 14:01

So how do we know the difference between a child that's a worrier versus a child that has anxiety?

**Bev Johns** 14:07

Right, right. Well, I would say that we all worry. And frankly, we all have anxiety. When I was presenting yesterday, I was, you know, before I presented, I had anxiety and I was...because why? Because I was worrying that the equipment wouldn't work. I was worrying that I'd have enough materials for people. Those are all normal reactions. And I think that one of the things we can do with children and with ourselves is identify those things that make us worry. But once we get into this whole notion of anxiety disorders, then what we're talking about are the children who the anxiety is interfering with their life functioning. I mean, there were certain things that they're not able to do and developmentally inappropriate. I mean, like young children are going to worry, it's just part of development. And then when it's lasting for six months or more, then it's a concern to us. And what is problematic is that we have identified children who have somewhere on the spectrum, anxiety. And we may be able to identify that when they're young. But what's found is that there is an 8 to 10 year delay in them getting treatment.

**Kristina Scott** 15:35

Wow, that speaks to the mental health services in our country.

**Bev Johns** 15:39

Exactly. Mental health. Or the other thing is, they may be getting treatment for something else and not for the anxiety. Because a number of things might be related to anxiety, but they're presenting themselves as Oppositional Defiant Disorder, when it's really anxiety. But they don't want anybody to know they're anxious, so they act up to cover it up.

**Kristina Scott** 16:05

So sometimes we see internalizing behavior. But sometimes we do see that externalizing behavior too.

**Bev Johns** 16:09

We do and I always say that our children are complex, little beings. And we have to recognize that sometimes the behavior that they're exhibiting externally is not always what it seems to be.

**Kristina Scott** 16:29

So you gave us a number of strategies in the classroom, but anxiety or worry goes across environments. What are some strategies for parents in the home environment?

**Bev Johns 16:38**

I think that parents again, can teach their children how to emotionally regulate with, you know, some relaxation strategies and deep breathing, and actually actively listening to their children and not denying their children's feelings. And yesterday in the audience, I gave some questions that parents can ask their children, as opposed to saying, 'How are you? How did school go today?' Getting a little bit more specific, like 'What made you happy?' You know, when you were at school today, or is there anything you want to talk about, so that they're less anxiety provoking, but the big thing is actively listening and not denying what they're feeling. So if they're telling us that something is too hard for them, we need to take note of that. And what we don't need to do is say, Oh, that's easy, or you can do it. There's a little book that I like, it's called, I Can't Do It Yet, which gives children hope. And I think that parents have to focus on their children's strengths, and what their children do well, they need to model the strategies. And then they need to remember the cognitive flexibility activity. So remembering that your child is not going to be able to go make their bed, go out and have breakfast, get their clothes on, a lot of things at one time, you've got to break it down. One of the other things that I see is, you know, get your room clean, they'll take one little step, you know, put five of your toys away. So giving them parameters, and not overwhelming them.

**Kristina Scott 18:32**

So these are some great strategies for parents and for teachers that you gave us earlier. What are some additional resources that if people want to learn more about this topic, where can they go? I know you've written a number of books.

**Bev Johns 18:44**

Right, and our latest book was published by Rutledge. And it's all about some practical strategies. It's called Working with Students who have anxiety. And one of the things that we did in that book as we not only talk about practical strategies for parents and educators in general, but we also because two of my colleagues are artists, and they have developed many art activities that are destressors for children and also help children identify what their worries and fears really are through art. Because I'm a firm believer in using the arts, at home and in the classroom. And so, letting children express themselves through the visual arts or through music. We know with adults music is a wonderful destressor. So, the book has a lot of activities that parents and educators can do in terms of utilizing the arts to help destress their children.

**Kristina Scott 20:00**

Right, it sounds like it has a lot of different learning interests of students built into the book, which says what we need in our classrooms and in our homes.

**Bev Johns 20:08**

Sadly, that's right. That's right. Because, you know, the real challenge is we have like, you know, 1/4 of our children in the classrooms have anxiety, which is a huge number, which is a lot of children. That's why I say teaching and parenting are rocket science. I mean, because what we're trying to do is figure out the multiple needs that children have, and why children behave the way they do in their complex ways. They and there's usually not one simple answer.

**Kristina Scott** 20:45

So thank you for your time, Dr. Johns, I appreciate this conversation and I hope to speak to you more in the future.

**Bev Johns** 20:52

Okay, thank you very much and I'm delighted to talk about this topic.

**Lauren** 21:04

Thank you for listening to the LDA Podcast. This series is made possible by The Learning Disabilities Foundation of America. Our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes. In our next episode, we talk to Tracy Gregoire about the Healthy Children's Project. For more resources from LDA visit [ldaamerica.org](http://ldaamerica.org)