

Mindful Moments

Mental Health Quarterly Newsletter August 2025

Supporting Your Child's Mental Health During the Return to School

Dear Parents and Caregivers;

As students head back to school, whether after summer break, a long absence, or a major life event, parents/caregivers often focus on preparing supplies, arranging schedules, and getting back into routines. But just as important—and sometimes more important—is helping your child prepare emotionally for the return to the classroom.

Why Mental Health Matters at the Start of the School Year

Returning to school can stir up a range of feelings for children and teens: excitement, nervousness, stress, fear, and even sadness. For some, school is a safe and exciting place to reconnect with friends. For others, it can bring anxiety about academics, social pressures, or past difficulties. Mental health is the foundation for successful learning and positive social experiences. When children feel emotionally safe, supported, and resilient, they are better able to focus, learn, and thrive.

Common Emotional Challenges Students Face

- **Separation anxiety** (especially in younger children)
- **Social anxiety** (worry about friendships, bullying, or fitting in)
- **Academic stress** (fear of falling behind or meeting expectations)
- **Adjustment struggles** (getting used to new teachers, classmates, or school buildings)
- **Lingering effects of trauma or major changes** (such as family moves, loss, or illness)

It's important to remember that every child reacts differently. Some may outwardly seem fine while struggling internally.

How Parents Can Support Their Child's Mental Health

1. Open the Conversation

- Ask open-ended questions: "How are you feeling about going back to school?"
- Listen without immediately offering advice or judgment.



- Normalize their feelings: “It’s okay to feel nervous. A lot of people do when they start something new.”

2. Rebuild Routines Gradually

- Start sleep, meal, and homework routines a week or two before school begins.
- Predictable routines help children feel safe and prepared.

3. Focus on Strengths

- Remind your child of their past successes: “Remember how well you handled starting third grade last year?”
- Celebrate small wins as school starts: getting up on time, packing their bag, making a new friend.

4. Practice Problem-Solving Together

- Role-play tricky situations (like what to do if they forget their homework).
- Help them brainstorm coping strategies for managing anxiety, such as breathing exercises or seeking help from a trusted adult.

5. Watch for Warning Signs

- Persistent sadness, withdrawal, refusal to attend school, frequent headaches/stomachaches, or changes in sleep and appetite may indicate a deeper issue.
- Early intervention can make a big difference. If you're concerned, reach out to the school counselor, pediatrician, or a mental health professional.

6. Take Care of Yourself Too

- Children pick up on your emotions. Managing your own stress around the return to school sets a powerful example.

When to Seek Extra Help

If your child’s emotional struggles don’t improve after a few weeks or seem to be getting worse, it might be time to get extra support. Schools often have counselors or psychologists who can help, and outside mental health providers can offer additional tools and therapy if needed.

Remember!

Every child deserves to feel safe, supported, and hopeful about school. Your encouragement, patience, and understanding can help pave the way for a strong start to the new school year—and a mentally healthy one.

With Best Wishes for a Great 25-26 School Year,
Your Flagler Schools Mental Health Team



Helping Your Child Cope with Anxiety

Best Practices for Parents of Children Diagnosed with EBD, ADHD, Autism and Depression

Raising a child with **Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD)**, **Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**, **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**, or **Depression** brings unique joys – and sometimes unique worries. One common thread across these diagnoses is **anxiety**: feelings of fear, worry, or nervousness that can affect daily functioning, relationships, and self-esteem. The good news? There are practical, effective strategies you can use at home to help your child **manage anxiety**, build **resilience**, and find greater peace.

Here's what every parent should know:

1. Understand How Anxiety Shows Up

Anxiety doesn't always look like worry. In children and teens with EBD, ADHD, Autism, or Depression, anxiety might appear as:

- Meltdowns or shutdowns
- Irritability or aggression
- Avoidance of tasks or people
- Somatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
- Difficulty concentrating or sleeping

Tip: Behavior is communication. Before reacting to behavior, ask: *"Could this be anxiety in disguise?"*

2. Create a Calm, Predictable Environment

Children thrive when they know what to expect. Predictability reduces the unknowns that fuel anxiety.

- **Use visual schedules** or daily planners.
- **Give advance notice** of changes in routine.
- **Set clear expectations** in behavior and tasks.

Tip: Build “calm rituals” into the day (like a 5-minute breathing break after school) so your child expects and enjoys moments of calm.

3. Teach and Practice Coping Skill

Don't wait until a crisis — help your child build coping “muscles” every day.

Effective Coping Skills to Practice:

- **Deep Breathing:** “Smell the flower, blow out the candle.”
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Tensing and relaxing muscles to release stress.
- **Mindfulness:** Grounding exercises like “5 things I can see, 4 things I can feel,” etc.
- **Positive Self-Talk:** Helping your child develop encouraging inner dialogue (“I can handle this,” “I am safe”).

Tip: Practice coping skills *before* they're needed, not just during anxious moments.

4. Validate Feelings Without Enabling Avoidance.

It's tempting to “rescue” your child from anxiety-provoking situations. But avoidance strengthens anxiety over time.

- **Validate feelings:** “I see that you're nervous, and that's okay.”
- **Encourage small steps:** “Let's try it together. You don't have to do it alone.”

Tip: Focus on *bravery, not comfort*. Praise efforts to face fears, even if it's just a small step.

5. Use Visual Supports and Social Stories

Especially for children with Autism or ADHD, **visual aids** and **storytelling** can help make abstract feelings like anxiety more concrete and manageable.

- **Create a visual “Feelings Thermometer”** to help your child label their level of anxiety.
- **Use Social Stories** to prepare your child for new situations (doctor's appointments, starting a new class, etc.).

Tip: Visuals reduce the cognitive load and make coping feel more manageable.

6. Model Healthy Coping Yourself.

Your child learns by watching you. When you manage your own stress openly and constructively, you teach powerful lessons.

- Talk aloud about how you calm yourself: “I'm feeling stressed, so I'm going to take some deep breaths.”
- Stay as calm as possible during your child's anxious episodes — your calmness can be contagious.

Tip: It's okay to acknowledge your own challenges. Realistic modeling is more helpful than pretending you're always fine.

7. Seek Professional Help When Needed

Sometimes anxiety is too big to manage alone. Therapists, counselors, or psychologists trained in **CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy)**, **DBT (Dialectical Behavior Therapy)**, or specialized interventions for Autism and ADHD can offer critical support.

Signs that professional help might be needed:

- Anxiety interferes significantly with daily life.
- Your child's world keeps getting “smaller” (avoiding more and more things).
- Physical symptoms (like stomach aches or headaches) are frequent and intense.

Tip: Therapy is not a failure — it's a tool for empowerment and skill-building.

Anxiety can feel overwhelming – for children and parents alike. But remember: **anxiety is treatable**, and with the right supports, your child can learn to navigate it successfully.

The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety completely. It's to help your child **face it with courage, build resilience, and live a rich, full life.**

Every step you take – no matter how small – matters.

Every moment you listen, validate, and encourage matters.

You and your child are stronger than you think.

Parent Connection



A Journal Entry by "C", an 18 year old living with Autism and Anxiety

Journal Entry – April 28, 2025

Today was one of those days where everything felt *too much*.

When I woke up, my brain already felt like it was spinning. I could hear every little noise – the ceiling fan, the birds outside, my brother clanking around in the kitchen – and it made my chest feel tight before I even got out of bed.

I had to give a presentation in English today. I practiced it like 30 times last night (and probably could have done it 30 more), but when I got up there, all the eyes staring at me made my hands shake. My voice sounded weird in my own ears, like it was coming from somewhere else. I felt myself starting to get hot and I kept thinking, *Everyone sees you're freaking out. Everyone knows.*

Ms. "Y" gave me the "you're okay" nod from the back of the room. That helped a little. I finished the presentation, but I barely remember what I said. I just wanted it to be over.

At lunch, I sat by myself. I usually don't mind – sometimes it's safer – but today it made me feel even more alone. I tried doing my breathing exercises like my counselor taught me: in for four, hold for four, out for six. It helped... not a lot, but enough.

I hate feeling like this. Like there's this invisible wall between me and everyone else. Like everyone else got the manual on how to be "normal" and I somehow missed it.

But I also know (even if it's hard to believe it sometimes) that I'm not broken. My brain just works differently. And that's okay.

At least, that's what I'm trying to remind myself.

One thing I'm proud of today:

I didn't run out of the classroom during my presentation, even though I really, really wanted to.

One thing I want to work on:

Telling myself *before* things happen that I can handle them – not just afterwards.

Signing off for now.

The Benefits of Mindfulness Meditations for Teens

In today's fast-paced, high-pressure world, teens face an unprecedented range of challenges. Between academic demands, social media pressures, extracurricular activities, and personal changes, it's no wonder so many young people experience stress, anxiety, and even burnout. One simple but powerful tool that can help is mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness meditation is the practice of focusing attention on the present moment without judgment. It's not about "emptying the mind," but about paying attention to what's happening right now—whether it's sensations in the body, thoughts, emotions, or the environment— with curiosity and kindness. For teens, mindfulness offers numerous emotional, mental, and even physical benefits.

1. Stress Reduction

Mindfulness teaches teens how to recognize when they are stressed and respond in a calmer, more intentional way. Instead of being swept away by anxiety or pressure, mindfulness gives teens tools to pause, breathe, and reset. Research shows that even a few minutes of daily mindfulness can significantly lower cortisol (the "stress hormone") levels.

2. Improved Focus and Academic Performance

Teens are often expected to multitask—homework, group chats, social media, and chores all competing for attention. Mindfulness strengthens the ability to concentrate by training the brain to stay with one task at a time. Teens who practice mindfulness often report better study habits, greater ability to focus in class, and improved test performance.

3. Better Emotional Regulation

Adolescence is a time of intense emotions. Mindfulness helps teens become more aware of their feelings without immediately reacting. Over time, this builds emotional resilience. Instead of lashing out when angry or shutting down when sad, teens learn to notice their emotions, name them, and make thoughtful choices about how to respond.

4. Decreased Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

Studies consistently find that mindfulness programs reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression in teens. Mindfulness doesn't eliminate difficult emotions, but it changes the teen's relationship

with those emotions. By learning to observe feelings without getting overwhelmed by them, teens can experience a greater sense of peace and control.

5. Improved Relationships

Mindful awareness helps teens listen more deeply, communicate more clearly, and empathize with others. This can improve relationships with friends, family members, teachers, and romantic partners. Conflict is a natural part of growing up, but mindfulness offers tools to handle disagreements with more patience and understanding.

6. Greater Self-Compassion

Many teens are extremely hard on themselves. Mindfulness encourages self-kindness, helping teens treat themselves with the same compassion they would offer a good friend. This shift can support healthier self-esteem and reduce perfectionism.

7. Healthy Sleep Habits

Sleep problems are common among teens, and mindfulness can help. By calming the mind before bed, teens may find it easier to fall asleep and stay asleep. Practices like body scans and mindful breathing are particularly effective in promoting better sleep hygiene.

Getting Started with Mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation doesn't have to be complicated or time-consuming. Teens can begin with just 5–10 minutes a day. Some simple ways to start include:

- **Breathing exercises:** Focus on the inhale and exhale for a few minutes.
- **Body scans:** Bring attention slowly from head to toe, noticing sensations.
- **Mindful walking:** Pay attention to each step and the sensations in the body.
- **Guided meditations:** Many free apps and YouTube videos offer teen-friendly mindfulness practices.

Consistency matters more than length. Even short daily practices can create lasting benefits over time.

Mindfulness meditation is not a cure-all, but it is a powerful support for teens navigating one of the most complex stages of life. It equips them with practical tools for managing stress, improving emotional well-being, and cultivating a kinder relationship with themselves and the world around them. In a society that often pulls attention in a hundred directions at once, mindfulness brings teens back to where real life happens: right here, right now.

Mental Health Counseling Team

The Role of the Mental Health Counselor

The role of the Mental Health Counselor (MHC) is crucial and multifaceted with Flagler Schools.

1. Direct Service

- **Individual Counseling:** Provide regular counseling sessions to address emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs that impact a student's educational performance.
- **Group Counseling:** Facilitate skill-building groups (social skills, anger management, coping strategies, etc.).
- **Crisis Intervention:** Provide support to students in emotional crises, ensuring safety and stabilization.

2. Collaboration with Educational Staff

- **Support Teachers:** Help teachers understand students' emotional/behavioral needs and how to adjust classroom strategies accordingly.
- **Consultation:** Work with teachers, paraprofessionals, school counselors and other departments to develop behavior plans, accommodations, and interventions.
- **Behavioral Intervention Planning:** Assist via consultation in creating and implementing Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) and Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs).

3. Family and Caregiver Support

- **Communication:** Collaborate with families to share strategies, progress, and ways they can support the students home environment.
- **Resource Connection:** Refer families to outside mental health services, agencies, or community supports when needed.

4. Program and Compliance Support

- **IEP (Individualized Education Program) Participation:** Attend and contribute to IEP meetings, particularly regarding social-emotional and behavioral goals.
- **Documentation:** Maintain records of services, progress notes, and intervention outcomes, ensuring compliance with district and state requirements.
- **Progress Monitoring:** Provide reports on students' mental health service goals and interventions for the IEP team.

5. Prevention and Skills Development

- **Coping Skills Development:** to promote resilience, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and peer relationship skills.
- **Early Identification:** Recognize early signs of mental health concerns and intervene proactively.

Mental Health Counselors bridge clinical support and educational success for students. They promote emotional well-being to help students access and benefit from their education.

Christiana Griffith-Keith, MSW, Indian Trails Middle School, Hours: 7:30-2:45

Devon Staropoli-Kellum, LMHC, Buddy Taylor Middle School/Flagler-Palm Coast High School, Hours: 7:30-2:45/8:00-3:15

Duane Bedgood, MSW, Belle Terre Elementary/Old King Elementary, Hours: 8:30-3:45

Mary Cox, LMHC, Flagler-Palm Coast High School, Hours: 8:00-3:15

Megan Walls, LMHC, Matanzas High School, Hours: 7:35-2:55

Dr. Sheri (Cheryl) Taylor, LMHC, Wadsworth Elementary School, hours:8:30-3:45

Taurean Wilson, LMHC, Rymfire Elementary School/Bunnell Elementary School, Hours: 8:30-3:45

Waynetha Ferguson, LMHC, Buddy Taylor Middle School/Rise Up, Hours: 7:30-2:45

Dr. Yvette Sabater-Lenk, PhD, MSW, ACM, Matanzas High School, Hours: 7:35-2:55

School Social Work Team

What Does A School Social Worker Do?

Supporting Your Child's Well-Being and Success in School

School social workers are part of your child's support team! They work closely with students, families, teachers, and the community to help remove barriers to learning and promote emotional and academic success.

How We Help Students:

- **Counseling Support:** We meet with students individually or in groups to help with:

- Stress, anxiety, or depression
- Friendship or peer issues
- Family changes or loss
- Anger or behavior challenges
- **Crisis Help:** If your child is in emotional distress, we help them feel safe and supported, and connect you with additional services if needed.
- **Skill Building:** We teach students healthy ways to cope, manage emotions, solve problems, and build relationships.

How We Support Families:

- **Connecting to Resources:** We help families access food, housing support, counseling, healthcare, and more.
- **Understanding School Systems:** We explain school processes like IEPs, 504 Plans, attendance policies, and academic supports.
- **Support for Parenting:** We offer guidance and tools to help with common parenting challenges.

How We Work With Schools:

- Collaborate with teachers and staff to support your child's learning and behavior.
- Advocate for students' rights and needs.
- Help build a safe, inclusive, and respectful school environment.

When to Reach Out to the School Social Worker:

- Your child is struggling emotionally or behaviorally
- There's a family change or hardship (divorce, illness, loss, housing issue)
- You need help finding community services
- You want to better understand how to support your child's education

We're Here for You!

Your school social worker is a caring, confidential support for both you and your child. Don't hesitate to reach out, we're here to listen, support, and connect.

Brittany Sweeting, LCSW, Bunnell Elementary/Indian Trails Middle School, Hours: 8:30-3:45/7:30-2:45

Jennifer D'Amato, LCSW, Matanzas High School, Hours: 7:35-2:55

Mary Everett, LCSW, Belle Terre Elementary/Wadsworth Elementary/Old Kings Elementary School, Hours: 8:30-3:45

Michelle Yorio, MSW, Tier 3 Intensive/GSB, Hours: 8:00-3:15

Sharrell Arneaud, LCSW, Buddy Taylor Middle/Rymfire Elementary School, Hours: 7:30-2:45/8:30-3:45

Tokay Perugia, LCSW, Flagler-Palm Coast High School, Hours: 8:00-3:15

Amanda Rhine, MSW, Rise-Up, Hours: 8:00-3:15



Yvette Sabater-Lenk

Yvette is using Smore to create beautiful newsletters

