



ADA Live! Episode 97: Back to School with the ADA in a COVID-19 World

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Host: Beth Miller Harrison, Director of Knowledge Translation, Southeast ADA Center

Rachel Busman: Hi, I'm Rachel Busman and you're listening to ADA Live!

4 Wheel City: (rapping) Yo. All right, let's roll. Let's go.

Beth Miller Harrison: Hello everyone. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network, welcome to ADA Live! I am Beth Harrison, director of knowledge translation for the Southeast ADA Center. Listening audience, if you have any questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, ADA, you can use the online form any time at adalive.org.

A new school year is beginning. Both children and parents are anxious about what the new year holds. The typical concerns of will I find my classroom, or will I have classes with my friends, are now paired with the public safety concerns about the Delta variant of COVID. Schools this fall may have masked mandates, hybrid and virtual learning options, fewer special education services, and modified social activities, sports and graduations. In

addition, children may face the stress of parents working from home, or worse, coping with job loss.

Here to discuss how we can help our kids manage their worries and have a successful school year is Dr. Rachel Busman, a licensed clinical psychologist and senior director of the Child and Adolescent Anxiety and Related Disorders Program with Cognitive and Behavioral Consultants, or CBC. Thank you so much for being with us today, Rachel.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, schools have an obligation to provide a free, appropriate public education, or FAPE to students with disabilities. However, fulfilling this obligation has been a challenge during the last year because of the ongoing pandemic. This interruption of services can cause its own unique stress to children and parents.

Over the last and a half with COVID-19 pandemic, have you seen changes in your practice in terms of the issues that children and youth are coming to you for, Rachel?

Rachel Busman: First of all, thank you so much for having me today. I'm so glad we're talking about this. It's just a really important topic and it's been an unprecedented time. I know that the challenges our kids have faced during this pandemic have been incredibly stressful. And as a psychologist who treats anxiety disorders, I can tell you that I have seen anxiety in kids and caregivers during this time, and increasingly. And I think the anxiety cuts across all ages, boys and girls, parents, caregivers, teachers, kids with disabilities, for sure. I've also seen incredible resilience, which I hope we can talk about as well.

In terms of what I've seen in my clinical work, I'm still seeing kids and teens with the common anxiety presentations that we often see. But I do see a few things that are perhaps more prominent or have become more prominent during the pandemic.

So first of all, I've seen kids, and when I say kids, I mean, kids, teens, struggle with separation anxiety. And not just young kids having fears or worries about that. So when I say separation anxiety, I mean fear or distress around separations from caregivers. And I

think that maybe after being home for such a long time and being out of practice with those separations that have just become really commonplace in the past, it's just become harder.

I don't think the pandemic has caused this, but we see that kids who are home and kids who have trouble adjusting back to things like sleepaway camp, or back to the regular routine and just sometimes even leaving the house, it's definitely something that I've seen. And secondly, I've seen kids and teens really not surprisingly struggle with depression or low mood, and feelings of isolation and disconnection during this time.

Beth Miller Harrison: Yeah, that's a heavy load that everyone is having to bear. And every school year brings a certain amount of anxiety, but with this current health crisis and the added stress, how do I know, Rachel, if my child's anxiety is something I should be really worried about?

Rachel Busman: Well, it's a good question. And I think just the fact that we're having this podcast means we're asking the right questions. But you're right, the start of the school year, or the start of just things in general can cause some really normal anxiety. And we do know that kids worry about things like school or new friends, and that's pretty normal, right? But when we see kids worrying about things really far in advance, or when the worry seems a little over the top or excessive, that would be more of a cause for concern.

So as an example, a child opting out of a play date or social opportunities because they're worried or preoccupied, that's a time to pay attention to that. Or if a child is worried about the new school year a week before school or two weeks before school, that's probably pretty typical. But I've worked with kids who were already thinking about the new school year before the previous school year had even ended.

We really want to keep on top of things like eating habits and sleep, and watch for changes that persist. So that's something a parent or caregiver can watch out for. I don't mean saying up late because it's summer. Or I don't mean a teenager who's going to bed late because they're texting with a friend. I mean, difficulty falling asleep, a lot of waking

up in the middle of the night, and I mean loss of appetite for longer than just a day here or there.

Also, our kids might actually tell us that they're worried, and it's really important to listen. So it might sound really, really typical. So your child might tell you something or your teen might tell you something that sounds pretty typical, and that's okay. You can validate, "Wow, that sounds hard. It sounds like you're thinking about this. That's not so uncommon." But if your child or teen, for example, is asking you the same kinds of questions, the same questions over and over, and you've already answered them, and they seem like really worrying questions and they can't move past that, then I consider that a reason to get more help.

Beth Miller Harrison: Thank you, Rachel. Yeah, I think those are some good tips for when there might be some red flags for something that needs some professional help. As a parent though, are there certain strategies that I could use to help my child who's worried about returning to school?

Rachel Busman: Absolutely. And I think that often using some informal strategies are really a great way to sort of test it out to see if my strategies work, great. And then we can monitor the usefulness of those strategies and keep on top of it.

So the first thing we want to do is something called validate before offering solutions. And so it's really important to do that because kids, all people really, not just kids, want to feel heard and want to know their concerns are being taken seriously. So just saying something like, "That sounds hard," or, "I hear you're nervous about homework," or, "Sounds like you're really worried," is really helpful and it lets your child know, "I get it."

Even if the worry seems really trivial. So for example, if your child says, "I'm nervous, I'm not going to remember where the bathrooms are." And you're thinking you're going to know where the bathrooms are because there's going to be a sign. Or that seems like a silly worry. It's really important to say something like, "I get it. Yeah. You're worried where the bathroom is. Kids worry about a lot of things. Let's talk about it." So we want to let a

child know, I hear you, I get it before we jumped to solutions. I think often adults are really good about coming up with solutions, but we want to make sure we first validate.

The other thing that's really important is to get more information. So for example, if your child says, "I'm nervous to go back to school," you might start thinking, oh, they must be really worried about the homework, or they must be really worried about math facts, when in fact that's not what they're thinking about. They might be thinking about their peers. And I think we sometimes inadvertently think back to when we were at school, and we might think back to the things that worried us. And we might miss an opportunity to get more information.

So if your child says, "I'm nervous about school," or "I can't stop thinking about school," before you jump to conclusions, say, "Hmm. So you're nervous about school. I want to understand it. Tell me more. What things are you nervous about?" Because then you can offer solutions that are going to be tailored to what your child is actually worried about.

Then it may be that your child just needs some reminders that many worries are really common and get easier over time. For example. "Yeah, you might really be worried about where your classroom is because you're going to switch classes this year, and that's really common. And I bet that after a week, maybe five days, maybe three days, it's not going to be so hard anymore."

Or if your child's worried about something that seems more substantial to you, or seems more of a cause of concern, you could reach out to the school psychologist or a counselor or a teacher. If your child has a 504 or an IEP, a case manager or another interventionists, and give them a heads up so that you and your child have support.

And it's also just important, and I'm sure we're going to talk about this in a little bit, to reach out for some more specific mental health support from a professional, because we have been working with kids during the pandemic and well before, and there are some really great treatments for anxiety.

Beth Miller Harrison: Great. Thank you, Rachel. And I think that what you said about validating our children's feelings is so important to making sure that they know they're

being listened to and taken seriously. And I also like how you recommended reaching out to perhaps a school counselor or psychologist, that kind of thing, to ask for that support when you need it. What are some coping mechanisms for anxiety that we can teach our children? Are there any?

Rachel Busman: Yeah, I think there are lots actually. And children really well with tips and strategies. Again, adults do really well. When we're trying to figure out how to get over something or struggle through something, giving someone a few things to do is helpful. It makes you feel a little bit more in control.

It's important to keep it brief and simple. So lengthy explanations can get really overwhelming. And depending on the age of the child, if the child has any processing difficulties or language-based learning disorders, we really want to keep that in mind. When we're stressed or worried, more isn't always better. So keeping it simple can be helpful.

First reminding kids that it's really very completely normal to get anxious about things, and feeling anxious is really our body and brain's way of sounding an alarm. So that's just really important to let kids and teens know, good news, your fight or flight system, or your alarm system is working. That's great. However, sometimes an alarm can be false. So we want to check the facts. So for example, if your child's worried about some kind of bad outcome, like not finding their class or being the only one who can't get their homework done, we can ask them how often has that happened before. Kids usually know what a detective or a scientist is. So we can say, "Let's be a scientist. Let's check the facts." And we're really helping a child or a teen think about what's the likelihood of this bad thing happening. So that can be really helpful.

Telling kids that being brave means doing things that are hard but doable, is also helpful. So saying, "Going back to school may be hard and kids can do it. And so practice makes better." I don't like to say practice makes perfect because there really isn't perfection. So the chances are that after a few days and weeks, things might be easier.

And then the last thing is there are some really great and free apps that we can download, and that kids who are particularly maybe interested in things like mindfulness or following their breath, and there's some really kid-friendly things like GoZen! or GoNoodle is really helpful to do some of these like movement or yoga or meditative sort of exercises. And again, for some kids that can be really helpful.

Beth Miller Harrison: Interesting. I never even thought about app that could help kids. So that's really interesting. We will make sure that we share those with our listeners. Rachel, thank you so much. And ADA Live! listening audience, thank you. And if you have questions about this topic or any other ADA Live! topics, you can submit your questions online at www.adalive.org. Or call the Southeast ADA Center at 1-404-541-9001. And now a word from this episode's featured organization.

Commerical: The Burton Blatt Institute, BBI at Syracuse University reaches around the globe in its efforts to advance the civic, economic and social participation of people with disabilities. BBI builds on the legacy of Burton Blatt, former Dean of SU School of Education, and a pioneering disability rights scholar to better the lives of people with disabilities. BBI has offices in Syracuse, New York, New York City, Washington DC, Lexington, Kentucky, and Atlanta, Georgia. To learn more about BVI, visit their website at bbi.syr.edu.

Beth Miller Harrison: Welcome back. We are talking with Rachel Busman about the new school year, and student and parent anxiety.

Rachel, one of your areas of expertise is in selected mutism. I know this is a huge area of study in and of itself, but could you please touch on your work in this area? Is this a disability? Can selected mutism be a sign of anxiety?

Rachel Busman: I'm really glad that you asked about it because selective mutism is an anxiety disorder, but it's not really as well-known as some of the other disorders like generalized anxiety disorder or separation anxiety. So it is an anxiety disorder, and it's when a child who talks really comfortably in the home, struggles to speak in places where we would expect speech, like school, play dates, and sometimes with extended family. So

this is different than just shyness, and it's absolutely not due to willfulness or disobedience.

What it looks like, and it's really helpful to have a sense of what it could look like for a caregiver or a teacher, is a child who maybe isn't answering at all in school, or maybe to a very limited extent, or not speaking at all on a play date when we actually know that the child speaks usually very well.

Beth Miller Harrison: Well, when a child is newly diagnosed with a disability, what advice do you have for parents when they have to advocate for their child's rights in school, such as the accommodations they might need?

Rachel Busman: It's so important for parents to feel equipped to advocate for their child. And we could probably have a whole podcast just on this one question. I like to go to some resources that offer some information and tips in really user-friendly language. So I really like the website, understood.org, and there's a lot of really helpful information there. I think it's also really important for parents and caregivers to ask questions. And I think this is something that caregivers naturally feel nervous about.

There's a lot of information that schools can share, but it also can be really overwhelming to digest. So it's important to ask for clarification when needed, and even more than once. So it might mean asking an evaluator to go through a report and really break down exactly what something means. Numbers to me don't really mean much unless it's put in a context. So numbers are helpful, but saying a child's IQ is X, or their ability to comprehend a language or utilize certain specific strategies, aren't helpful unless it's put in sort of user-friendly context.

Also asking for a parenting advocate or a parent advocate sometimes at the school level, if a family is feeling like they need support in a 504 or IEP meeting. Sometimes parents don't know what accommodations they can ask for. So hearing what the school can offer, but then asking for what the caregiver feels is appropriate, is still okay to do that. And remembering that you can always reconvene a team. So if a family participates in a 504 or an IEP meeting, one, a family doesn't have to sign a document if they don't understand

it. But also it doesn't mean that that one meeting or that one time point is the only time. In fact, a child's needs change over time. And so it's a process, not a one-time event.

Beth Miller Harrison: Great. Thank you. I think that's important to realize, and I think sometimes parents forget that, that we're in this together for the long haul. The team's going to work with your child as their needs change.

There are so many things that parents are also having to navigate with return to school. As a parent, if I'm stressed out and anxious, how do I make sure I don't pass that on to my child? Are there certain things, Rachel, that I should or shouldn't do?

Rachel Busman: Yeah, it's a really important question. And it is true that parents or caregivers or adults, teachers can do this too, may inadvertently reinforcing anxiety, even when they don't mean to. So what I'm going to start by saying is this doesn't mean it's a parent or caregiver's fault. It just means that we can sometimes accidentally make anxiety stick around a little bit. So being aware of it is super helpful.

So one to remember is to act calm even if you don't feel it. And this might sound a little strange, but if, for example, you might be thinking, a parent might be thinking I'm so worried about school too. Or who can keep track, hybrid versus in-person, or masks versus not masks, or six feet versus X amount of feet? So you might be thinking exclamation point, exclamation point. But conveying that tone isn't a great idea.

So sometimes having a stock phrase, almost like a mantra, like, "I know this is hard and I know we'll get through it." That's one I really like to say. Is helpful, especially for those who in the moment might be feeling more stressed and need something to sort of hang their hat on. So that is one tip.

Also, leaning on other caregivers and supporters who can help is really helpful. So sometimes we find that a certain time of day is really stressful for us as a caregiver, and sometimes we can lean on our co-parents. And if you're a single parent, you might be leaning on another extended family member who maybe isn't in the house, but you could get on the phone to be helpful to you as the parent or to the child, is really a good idea. A

village is the mentality here. Villages are really important and leaning on our villages is important.

And the idea that practice makes better. So if practice makes better for the kids, it's true for the adults also. So parents can practice being brave by calmly letting their child to go to school, and tolerating that they might have worries about it, and they might have feelings of uncertainty and we're going to get through it. That's really helpful. So the parent can say to themselves, "I'm worried, but it's going to be okay."

Beth Miller Harrison: Thank you. I really like your suggestion of having a stock phrase. "I know this is hard and I know we'll get through this." I like that because sometimes when you're anxious as a parent, you don't know what to say. If you have that and you keep practicing it, it would perhaps come more naturally. Rachel, when will I know if it's time to seek professional help?

Rachel Busman: Yeah, it's a good question. I get asked this a lot and I wish there was a one answer, and there isn't. But I think the first thing to remember is to trust your gut as a parent. So if something tells you something isn't right, I think you always want to go with your gut and err on the side of seeking consultation. There's no harm in doing that. But one way to know is if you've tried some of these informal strategies. Maybe you've had a conversation about normal fears, maybe you've talked to your child about being brave, maybe you've practiced some separations, and that's not really working. Or if your child's or teen's anxiety really persisting into a couple of weeks. Or if the sleep or eating or just general mood and behavior just doesn't seem to be correcting. I think also a big red flag would be if your child seems really withdrawn or isolative.

And also, I didn't mention before, but sometimes kids who are anxious can show disruptive behavior because anxiety can take many forms. So I think if you see changes that are persisting more than a few days, so I would say a couple of weeks, and/or these eating or sleeping changes, you really want to think about getting some support. And there really is support out there. And sometimes a great place to start as your pediatrician because they might have some resources. Also connecting to the school and if your child has counseling, for example, reaching out to that counselor. If your child doesn't maybe

saying who are some providers that you as the school like. And sometimes parents want to keep it completely separate and that's fine. And I know we're going to talk about resources in a minute, but keeping those things in mind will be helpful in letting you know when you should seek more help.

Beth Miller Harrison: Thank you, Rachel. And I think one of the things that you just said that struck me was that anxiety might show itself as anger. I hadn't thought about that. I think that's important to know, really any kind of change in behavior. You as the parent, know your child.

As we wrap up, and you've mentioned several resources during our conversation this morning, Rachel, but are there any resources that you would specifically recommend to parents who are wanting to help their child with anxiety?

Rachel Busman: Yeah, absolutely. And I'm going to say a lot of long names, but hopefully we'll be able to pass these resources on. So one of them would be the American Academy of Pediatrics. So that's a great place, a great resource to find some good information. And there are a couple of organizations, so these are websites that are national, but they pride themselves on being what we call evidence-based. So meaning sort of grounded in the research. And so one is the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, and that's ADAA. And then the other one is the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapy, which is ABCT. And those have articles, a lot of free material on there, but they usually have a "find a provider" button, that you can search by state, you could search by zip code. And so not only can you find really good facts and statistics and articles, but you can also find some really good... To point you in the right direction in terms of providers.

You can certainly visit the website for the organization that I work at, at Cognitive Behavioral Consultants. There are some webinars there, there are some resources. But I think those are some great places to start.

And then I also would say, if you're looking for some of those mindfulness or more strategy-based programs, GoNoodle is something I really like for younger kids. And they

have something called GoFlow within that program, which is more mindfulness based. And then there are some apps like Calm or Stop, Breathe, Think. And some of these are apps that you have to pay for, but they have a certain amount of resources that are free. And I really like free because that's really accessible to a lot of people. So hopefully those are helpful.

Beth Miller Harrison: Oh, they will be. Thank you, Rachel. Those will be very helpful and we'll make sure that those are included on this episode.

And we thank you so much, Rachel. I really appreciate your time and willingness to be our guest today. The tips that you've shared, I think will help lots of parents and children as they return to school during this tumultuous time. And thank you, ADA Live! listeners for joining us for this episode.

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ADA Live! is a program of the Southeast ADA center. Our producer is Celestia Ohrazda, with Beth Miller Harrison, Mary Morder, Emily Rueber, Marsha Schwanke, and Barry Whaley. Our music is from 4 Wheel City, the Movement for Improvement. See you next episode, and be safe everybody.

4 Wheel City: (rapping)

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