

Dr. Kay:

My daughter hates getting in front of people and presenting projects. Many teachers are now assigning group projects that require her to talk in front of the class. She gets so nervous about it that she gets physically sick. Can she be excused from these projects?

– Susan W., Braselton, GA

It's natural for anyone to have some anxiety before they have to get in front of a group of people and be the center of attention. Some people exhibit actual symptoms of illness like vomiting and headaches or hot flashes, due to this worry. Your daughter has a problem that she can overcome.

This type of overwhelming fear is often associated with negative thoughts about the outcome of being in front of people. For example, your daughter might think she will make a mistake and that everyone will laugh at her and she'll never be able to live it down. Maybe she believes that people will be thinking about her in a negative way. She might fear the worst case scenario; she'll blow the project for the entire group or her presentation will be disastrous. To work with your daughter, you need to uncover the root cause of her concerns and realize that she has a real fear.

No matter what the root cause, it is important that the parent never uses the following terms:

“Don't worry.” She can't help but worry; she doesn't have the tools yet to overcome her legitimate fears.

“Stop it.” She can't help but continue these thoughts until she works it out in her head.

“You shouldn't be scared.” You might feel as though she shouldn't be scared but she is. Telling her otherwise won't help.

“You're faking it.” She isn't faking it; she has a fear and now she needs to work through this anxiety.

The first step is for her to identify the negative thought or fear she is experiencing.

“I think I'll make a mistake and people will laugh at me.”

“People think that I'm ____.” Fill in the blank here: fat, ugly, stupid, clumsy, etc.

“The whole thing is going to be terrible.”

Once she accepts what's going on in her head, she should think realistically about the situation. Even if she makes a mistake and people laugh, it will soon be forgotten.

People make mistakes every day. I see students trip in the hall with nothing in front of them to trip on; they just stumble on those ever-growing feet. People laugh but it's soon forgotten. I've seen students get sick in the middle of the cafeteria with 700 students around. They get teased by their friends for a day or two and then the incident is forgotten. Even if things do go wrong, it won't be as bad as she fears, and it won't last forever.

Some students who have this level of anxiety swear they know the other students are thinking or talking about them. Again, she needs to think realistically; she can't read people's minds. Yes, a student may be looking at her and even talking to their neighbor while staring in her direction. That doesn't mean they are necessarily talking about her or that they are talking bad. Even if they are talking about her, based on your daughter's long-term goals, does it really matter what they say? What they say will soon be forgotten.

Things may not go perfect, but the final outcome won't be as bad as she thinks. The portion of the grade determined by this project won't keep her out of the college of her choice or the career she wants to enter. Her boyfriend isn't going to dump her for messing up the project. Think realistically; this is a small project that has little impact on her future.

People feel comfortable with routine. Set a routine and stick with it even on those days that are out of the ordinary. Most people have a routine they go through as they get ready for school and work. These routines provide two functions, they make sure that everything gets done and provide a stress-free time. When the routine is disrupted, this could cause your daughter to become stressed about what is about to take place – the presentation. Even if she wants to change up her routine to get a project to school, keep the routine as close to normal as possible.

Have your child practice breathing and muscle contraction techniques. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Tell her to tighten every muscle in her body for 10 seconds and then release. Repeat these steps to get to a more calm state of being.

She can't be excused from her project. She needs to be advised how to work through her stress. Above all else, remember that your daughter's anxiety is real. As a parent, it's up to you to help her learn techniques to help her through her feelings. These techniques will probably be used, in one form or another, for the rest of her life.

If you have a question about your child's attendance at school, feel that your child refuses to go to school, or have a question about your child's education, you can Email me at DrJimK@yahoo.com and your question with my answer may be published in this

magazine.