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Improving access to mental health and wellness services and systems

Project INTERFACE Newsletter

Volume 3, Issue 3

Topic: Coping With School Anxiety

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Dear Mental Health Professionals:

**Coping With School Anxiety** is the theme for this issue of the Project INTERFACE Newsletter, which features the upcoming MSPP and Freedman Center program: *The Truth about Girls and Boys: Challenging Toxic Stereotypes About Children*. We hope you will find the information helpful and share it with your clients as appropriate.

We also wanted to let you know about a series of important trainings coming up on Suicide Prevention offered by the **Massachusetts Department of Public Health** at a discounted rate -[scroll down](#) for more details!

We frequently receive messages of appreciation from families such as the following from a parent in a Project INTERFACE subscribing community: "**Project INTERFACE was a real life saver! I had been trying to find a therapist for my school-aged son for over a year. It was a real struggle to find the right fit and I had almost given up when I reached out to Project INTERFACE. Their staff were supportive and very caring about meeting our family's needs. My son now has a great counselor that is close to home and has Saturday hours. I can't believe this is a free service. Now I spread the word whenever I can.**"

**Project INTERFACE is growing rapidly. We started to work in Chelmsford this July!**

*As always, please let us know if you have openings for new clients, if you have updates to your Project INTERFACE provider profile or if you know a provider who would like to participate in Project INTERFACE.*

If you have not yet updated your provider profile, please e-mail us at [updates@projectinterface.org](mailto:updates@projectinterface.org) to receive instructions for easy online updating.

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## Highlights from Recent Research

### "Children Who Won't Go To School (Separation Anxiety)"

*Excerpted from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's Facts for Families; No. 7; Updated March 2011.*

Going to school is usually an exciting and enjoyable event for young children. However, for some it can cause intense fear or panic. Parents should be concerned if their child regularly complains about feeling sick or often asks to stay home from school with minor physical complaints. Not wanting to go to school may occur at anytime, but is most common in children 5-7 and 11-14, times when children are dealing with the new challenges of elementary and middle school. These children may suffer from a paralyzing fear of leaving the safety of their parents and home. The child's panic and refusal to go to school is very difficult for parents to cope with, but these fears and behavior can be treated successfully, with professional help.

Learn more at:

[http://www.aacap.org/galleries/FactsForFamilies/07\\_children\\_who\\_wont\\_go\\_to\\_school.pdf](http://www.aacap.org/galleries/FactsForFamilies/07_children_who_wont_go_to_school.pdf)

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## Coping with School Anxiety: Tips for Parents

*by Nadja N. Reilly, PhD, Associate Director of the Freedman Center*

For some kids, the beginning of a new school year is associated with the excitement of seeing friends again, meeting a new teacher, or looking forward to new adventures. For some kids, however, the new year is associated with some worries or fears around school. Parents may start to hear more about stomachaches, worries about friends, and many "what if" questions. Here are some tips to help your child cope with school anxiety.

- Although some kids may express excitement about school starting, remember that it is still something new. It is understandable and normal for all kids to be a little nervous when anticipating something new. This is a great time to talk about expectations for the new school year. A helpful question to initiate conversation with your child might be: "What are you expecting this year to be like?" This open ended question will help you get a sense of your child's perceptions and expectations.
- If your child reports feelings of worry or anxiety, listen and respond empathically. This is a good time to ask with curiosity "What is that like for you? When do you feel calmest? When do you feel the most worried/stressed/anxious?" Be patient and calm - it is often difficult for children to articulate the feelings and thoughts associated with anxiety.
- Help your child recognize and identify signs of nervousness or anxiety in their bodies. Stomachaches, headaches, GI distress, racing heart, sweaty palms, and reports of tiredness are some physical symptoms typically reported by children experiencing anxiety. A helpful question might be: "Where in your body do you feel it when you are worried or nervous?"
- Help your child recognize and identify negative thoughts associated with anxiety. Children might express thoughts such as "I'm never going to make any friends," or "I won't know what to do if I get nervous." A helpful question might be: "When you get worried or nervous, what thoughts pop up in your head?" Gently confront the negative thoughts, for example, if a child says "I always mess up!" "Is it true that you always mess up? Let's think of a time when you did a great job."

- Teach your kids different ways to relax and target those negative thoughts. Allow children time to practice these skills in a calm, relaxed setting. Deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and imagery are all wonderful ways for children to learn how to relax.
- Problem solving and role playing together with your child can be a wonderful way to target negative thoughts. Help your child think about worrisome situations in advance. Encourage him/her to come up with as many alternatives as possible. Encourage your child to not pre-judge his/her solutions. Have fun and be creative - laughter and humor can be very therapeutic! A helpful way to initiate this process might be: "How might we handle \_\_\_\_\_?"
- While they are learning relaxation and use of their new problem solving skills, praise your children often for their efforts and partial successes. Strive for participation, not perfection. In this instance, the process is just as important as the outcome. Teach kids how to reward themselves, as well. A helpful thing to say might be: "Great job recognizing what was making you nervous - I can tell that you are trying very hard to feel more relaxed!"
- If your child is avoiding school, support a prompt return to school. The longer a child is out of the school setting, the more difficult it can be to resume a routine. Again, involve your child to the extent possible in this. A helpful question might be: "What would help you feel comfortable in returning to school?" Be kind but firm in that staying home is not an option.
- And finally, always encourage play, fun, and creativity. Make sure your child has time to play and do things that he/she enjoys. A helpful question might be: "What makes you feel happy?" Ask yourself that question, too, and be sure to play and be happy with your child.

### **When to seek additional help:**

It might be helpful to seek professional help if the following is true for your child:

1. Your child is exhibiting school avoidance that lasts for two weeks or longer
2. Your child's mood seems different and is negatively impacting school, social, and family life
3. Your child's academic functioning is declining

### **Recommended books:**

Eisen, A.R., & Engler, L.B. (2006). *Helping your child overcome separation anxiety or school refusal: A step-by-step guide for parents*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Koocher, G.P., & LaGreca, A.M., Editors (2011). *The parents' guide to psychological first aid: Helping children and adolescents cope with predictable life crises*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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## **Spotlight on Upcoming Programs**

### **The Truth about Girls and Boys: Challenging Toxic Stereotypes About Children**

**Date:** Saturday, October 1st, 2011

**Time:** 9:00 am-1 pm

**Location:** The Freedman Center, 225 Nevada St, Newton MA

**Instructor:** Rosalind C. Barnett, PhD and Caryl Rivers, MS

**Program Codes:** TGB4

**CE Credits:** 4 CE Credits

**Fee:** \$85

Today, both educators and parents are regularly fed a diet of "science" that is, at best, a misunderstanding of the research, and at worst, a deliberate misrepresentation of it. The education of young children is much too important to the future of our nation to let the situation remain unchallenged. A large body of literature refutes popular gender stereotypes. Through the use of lecture, interaction, and small group discussions, this program will raise the awareness of participants regarding their own potential gender stereotypes, for example, that girls are risk averse while boys are fearless, or that girls are naturally empathetic while boys are not. Participants will learn how stereotypes influence parents and teachers who unwittingly fall prey to them in everyday dealings with young children in their care.

Pre-registration requested.

To register, go to [https://netforum.avectra.com/eWeb/DynamicPage.aspx?Site=MSPP&WebCode=EventDetail&evt\\_key=aba4ee6d-85f0-43be-925c-d605e42f0fda](https://netforum.avectra.com/eWeb/DynamicPage.aspx?Site=MSPP&WebCode=EventDetail&evt_key=aba4ee6d-85f0-43be-925c-d605e42f0fda)

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## **Continuing Education**

### **Presented by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health**

#### **Suicide Prevention - Assessing & Managing Suicide Risk: Core Competencies for Mental Health Professionals**

**Instructors:** Barry N. Feldman, PhD, Director, Psychiatry Services in Public Safety UMass Medical Center

**Dates:** September 14th 2011, October 6th 2011, October 20th 2011, November 9th 2011

**Time:** 8:00 am-5 pm

**Location:** Various locations in the Greater Boston area

**CE Credits:** 7

**Tuition:** \$30

Suicidal behaviors are a reality for mental health professionals and a source of significant distress for them. This workshop focuses on competencies that are core to assessing and managing suicide risk and consists of:

- Pre-workshop reading (about 20 pages)
- 6.5 hours of face-to-face training, mixture of lecture & exercises
- Training DVD in eight segments, including demonstration of a clinical interview
- 110 page Participant Manual
- Participant journaling
- Q & A and discussion

Pre-registration requested.

**Please let them know you heard about this training from Project INTERFACE!**

To register, visit

<http://www.cvent.com/EVENTS/Calendar/Calendar.aspx?cal=09c0c137-816f-4931-99c1-ebc4e6cda259>

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**Project INTERFACE**

**An initiative of the Freedman Center for Child and Family Development  
at the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology**

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