

MIDDLE SCHOOL

ANXIETY



CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR SGLs

Oh, the middle school years. These years are filled with all kinds of transitions. Your students are not so little anymore, but they haven't quite reached big kid status yet. They're heading into school with "the big kids," yet don't really know their place. They've got all of these emotions coursing through their veins and their desire for independence seems to increase daily. With all of these changes often comes a bit of anxiety with it.

But at this age in particular, it's trickier to detect because middle schoolers have become skilled at hiding their true feelings. Research shows this age group in particular is really affected by not only what their peers think of them, but what's going on at home. And if they don't see those home issues resolved, they often internalize their feelings, and with that comes anxiety and depression.

Be their safe place (or find someone who can be).

Students, at this age, need an adult who understands their inner crisis. As their small group leader, you're in a unique position to be that for them. If you're not feeling up to the task or if you find it difficult to meaningfully connect with a student, bring another loving adult in to fill in the relational gap.

WHAT TO SAY:

- *“Tell me more about how you feel.”* (Their feelings may be over-hyped, but that shouldn’t stop you from attempting to understand their feelings. Listen intently without judgment.)
- *“How are your friends handling middle school? How are you doing?”* (Sometimes, going about the conversation from a different angle will compel your student to share.)
- *“Just know you can always talk to me about anything.”* (This is the phase when they’re building relationships and deciding who is for them. Keep your cool. Make sure they know you’re a safe, consistent place for them to land.)
- *“I know how it feels to feel out of control. Something that I’ve found to help is taking deep breaths. Do you want to try to take some deep breaths together?”* (A lot of anxious feelings are exacerbated when you’re not breathing properly.)
- *“What’s something you’re really good at? Do you know anyone else that’s into that, too?”* (Encourage them to see the positive qualities in themselves and connect them — if they haven’t already — to other like-minded students.)

WHAT **NOT** TO SAY:

- *“Anxiety has more to do with your brain than your situation.”* (Don’t overwhelm them with information.)
- *“This isn’t as big of a deal as you’re making it. I have way more reason to feel anxiety as an adult.”* (Don’t minimize what they’re feeling or going through.)
- *“Talk to me every time you start to feel like this.”* (Resist the urge to keep pushing for a response. Sometimes, it’s just not the right time.)

If your middle schoolers exhibit symptoms of anxiety for more than a week or two, it’s time to call in some outside help. Connect with their parents and encourage them to seek the guidance of a mental health professional.