

# What's a teacher's tipping point? Study researches teachers' reasons to refer anxious children

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QUT researcher Kaitlin Hinchliffe is asking teachers what their 'tipping points' are before referring children for more support in schools.

Teachers of primary-aged children who demonstrate excessive anxiety often won't refer a child for help unless there is enough support provided within a school, a new QUT study has revealed.

As more than 530,000 Queensland primary [school](#) students headed back to school this month, the researchers said anxiety was an important issue among children that needed to be addressed early rather than the later

years of schooling.

The study examined teachers' 'tipping points' before seeking intervention from student support teams in suspected cases of excessive anxiety among children.

The qualitative study was led by QUT's Master of Psychology (Education and Developmental) graduate Kaitlin Hinchliffe (pictured below) and supervised by Faculty of Education School of Cultural and Professional Learning Professor Marilyn Campbell.

Professor Campbell said previous research had shown teachers generally referred one child a year to their school's student support team but of all those students referred only five per cent were described as requiring help for 'emotional problems' or 'anxiety'.

"Results have shown teachers do possess the knowledge, skills and desire to identify, support and refer children with anxiety," Ms Hinchliffe said.

"But the low referral rate for anxious students does not match the known prevalence rates of [anxiety disorders](#) in children."

Professor Campbell said the prevalence of anxiety disorders among children was one in six.

"It is a normal part of a child's development to experience anxiety but problems occur when the behaviour becomes excessive," Professor Campbell said.

"It is critical to identify, refer and treat children as early as possible and it is teachers who play an essential role."

Ms Hinchliffe said there are broad variations between Australian states

in terms of guidance officers and school counsellor qualifications.

"In Queensland's state system, guidance officers must be registered teachers with relevant experience or qualifications in guidance and counselling or psychology; whereas in the Catholic system and most other states excluding New South Wales, educational psychologists without teaching qualifications may also work in the school counsellor role," she said.

"Increasing the counsellor to student ratio, and allocating resources to schools based on student needs rather than enrolments, are additional measures that could help to improve the identification and treatment of students with anxiety."

The research revealed the six main themes for teachers' decisions to seek help which included:

- Impact on learning
- Atypical child behaviour
- Repeated difficulties that do not improve over time
- Poor response to strategies
- Teachers' need for support
- Information from parents and carers.

Ms Hinchliffe said teachers often considered whether their school had a strong support system to cope before a decision to refer a child was made.

"Children display behaviours ranging from either loud, disruptive, crying behaviour to quieter withdrawn children," she said.

"It's often the quiet anxious ones who slip through the school system unidentified and miss out on the help they need."

Professor Campbell said the exploratory study involved 20 teachers from two Queensland primary schools.

The researchers hope to build on the study with a larger quantitative investigation into the influences on teachers' referrals and improve identification of excessive anxiety among quieter children in schools.

Professor Campbell said there was widespread interest from teachers to be more proactive in terms of children's mental health.

"More than 400 [teachers](#) recently participated in a Kids Matter Webinar session that discussed scenarios involving primary-aged [children](#)," Professor Campbell said.

"Teachers require more assistance in learning how to pinpoint excessive anxious behaviour."

**More information:** To watch the Webinar it is available on the [KidsMatter](#) website.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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