



Slow Processing Speed and Anxiety: What You Need to Know

By The Understood Team

At a Glance

- Kids with slow processing speed often feel anxious.

- Sometimes those feelings lead to chronic anxiety disorder.

- There are ways you can help lessen your child's anxiety.

Slow Processing Speed and Anxiety



Most kids with learning and attention issues face situations that make them feel anxious. Often, these situations involve their weakness. For a child with [dyslexia](#), it might be reading out loud in class. For a child with [dysgraphia](#), it might be writing a book report.

But for kids with slow processing speed, anxious moments can pop up throughout the day, and without warning. That's because their processing speed issues can impact everything from taking tests to talking with friends. And in some cases, the frequent anxiety turns into an anxiety disorder.

Here's what you need to know about the connection between slow processing speed and anxiety, and how you can help your child.

How Anxiety and Slow Processing Speed Fuel Each Other

When any of us feel anxious, we freeze for a moment. During that time, we're not processing information as fast as we might otherwise be. We may take longer to respond, make decisions or size up situations.

That's how anxiety can impact processing speed. But slow processing speed can also *create* feelings of anxiety.

Imagine a child sitting in class, taking a test. She sees her classmates moving quickly from problem to problem, while she trails behind.

That situation might create a lot of anxiety in the moment. It might even make her feel anxious before the next test. But the more anxious she becomes, the slower she gets.

It can be hard, then, to tell where the anxiety stops and the slow processing speed begins.

Why Kids With Slow Processing Speed Can Feel Blindsided

If a child has a learning issue in one area, like math, it can be easier for her to know when she'll get anxious. She might get stressed out every Friday morning before the weekly math test, for instance.

But a child with slow processing speed can be blindsided by many different situations where she suddenly can't keep up. She might be having a conversation with her coach, for instance, and miss the end of what he's saying.

If the teacher calls on her during a group discussion in class, she might take longer to respond than the other kids. The two extra seconds it takes her to answer can feel like a year—especially when her classmates are looking at her.

It can happen in social situations, too. She may have trouble keeping up with what's going on in her group of friends. Or she might not do something her friends were expecting her to do because she wasn't quick enough to process it.

Slow processing speed can also put kids in risky situations. A teen might go with her friends to a party, and not pick up on the fact that they plan to drink alcohol there. Once she's there and realizes that, she may start feeling anxious because she's in a situation she doesn't want to be in. But she also might not be able to come up with a way to get out of it.

Why Kids With Slow Processing Speed Can Feel “Unreliable” to Themselves

Kids with slow processing speed may not always realize how, or when, their issues are impacting them. That's especially true if they haven't been evaluated and diagnosed.

Subconsciously, they know they can count on themselves to do certain things successfully. They don't worry about whether they can organize their backpack, play soccer or read two chapters in their

history book—they just do it.

But suddenly they run into trouble doing something. Now, subconsciously, they may feel like they can't rely on themselves. Why, if they can do so much without a problem, are they suddenly struggling?

Often kids with slow processing speed have the sense they're a step behind everyone else. And that feeling, too, can create anxiety.

Chronic Anxiety and Slow Processing Speed

For some kids, the anxiety created by slow processing speed is contained to certain situations. But for a surprising number of them, it turns into a bigger problem. Kids may develop a chronic anxiety disorder that extends to multiple situations and areas of their lives.

When that happens, it's important to seek professional treatment. Therapy can be very effective. Sometimes anxiety medication can also help.

How to Help With Slow Processing Speed and Anxiety

Slow processing speed can be a hidden issue. Parents and kids often don't talk about it together, and others won't always notice the problems or pay much attention to it.

That leaves kids internalizing their struggles rather than sharing them and self-advocating for the support they need. The end result: They feel like something is wrong with them, and nobody understands.

Anxiety is something kids may hold inside and not talk about. They may be hyperaware of their emotional struggles without talking about them. That can make them feel like they're an island.

Here are some things you can do to minimize the anxiety your child may be feeling:

Reflect on your actions. You might unknowingly be doing things that increase your child's anxiety. If you find yourself telling your child to hurry up, recognize that feeling rushed may make her feel anxious.

Be aware of your own processing speed. It can be a big challenge when a parent's processing speed is fast while the child's is slow. It's important to recognize and respect the fact that there's no right or wrong speed—just differences in how you each operate.

Acknowledge the anxiety. Calling attention to it can help your child identify her feelings—the first step toward managing them. You can say something like, "I remember before last week's vocabulary test, you felt really nervous. Do you feel that now?"

Acknowledge the impact on the family. Your child's slow processing speed can affect the whole family. If she's always the last one to finish dinner or the last one out the door, family members may get frustrated or impatient with her. Talking openly about why that happens can decrease resentment and encourage everyone to support and help your child.

Build an awareness of time. You can help your child build awareness of the concept of time by including references to it in everyday conversation. You might say things like, “Grandma is coming in two hours” or “It only took you 10 minutes to clean your room.”

Build in extra time. If you know your child takes longer to do things, adjust her timetable (and yours) to accommodate that. If it’s her turn to unload the dishwasher, for instance, don’t wait until five minutes before dinner to remind her. Together, choose a time for her to start homework so she’ll be able to finish with enough time to relax before bed.

Rehearse things she can say to others. Because her issues aren’t always obvious, your child may have trouble knowing how to explain them and ask for help. Discuss and practice ways she can talk about her challenges to teachers, peers and family. For instance, she might tell a teacher: “I sometimes need more time to do my classwork. Can I take this worksheet home and finish it tonight?”

Regroup to discuss negative episodes. Your child’s anxiety may make you anxious, too. Sometimes that can lead to overly emotional interactions. After you both calm down, regroup and talk about what happened. Acknowledge how upsetting it was, and discuss ways you can work together to keep it from happening again.

Watch for signs of chronic anxiety. These can include physical, emotional and behavioral signs. Understand the different ways younger kids and tweens and teens show anxiety.

Consider treatment for anxiety. If your child’s anxiety gets in the way of her daily functioning, it’s important to seek help. Start by talking to her doctor about treatment options. These may include therapy and sometimes medication.

Understanding the link between anxiety and slow processing speed is the first step to getting your child help. But showing empathy is key to helping her recognize and manage her anxiety. It also lets her know she’s not alone, and that you’re there to support her. Bringing her struggles out into the open can also help her build vital self-advocacy skills.

Key Takeaways

- **Slow processing speed and anxiety can fuel each other.**
 - **Therapy and medication are two possible treatments for chronic anxiety.**
 - **Understanding and acknowledging your child’s issues can reduce anxiety.**
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About the Author



The Understood Team is composed of writers, editors and community moderators, many of whom have children with learning and attention issues.

Reviewed by



Ellen Braaten, Ph.D., is the director of LEAP and codirector of the Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds, both at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Chat With an Expert



**Mon Apr 29 at
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RSVP

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32 Laight Street, 1st Floor

New York, NY 10013-2152

Media inquiries: media@understood.org (preferred) or (516) 654-7584

Support inquiries: [u.org/ask](https://www.understood.org/ask)

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