

Teacher kit

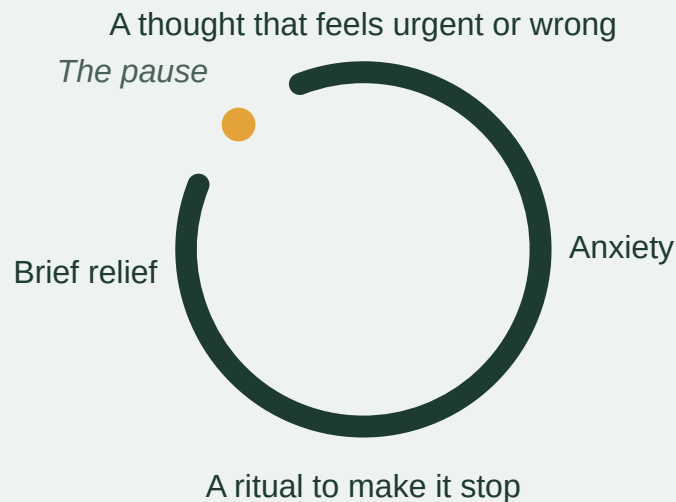
OCD in the classroom

A guide for teachers and school staff



What OCD is

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a common, treatable mental health condition. It often starts in childhood or the teen years, so chances are you have taught students who live with it.



Obsessions are unwanted thoughts, images, or urges that keep coming back: "What if I get sick?", "What if I did it wrong?", "What if something bad happens?"

Compulsions are things a student does, or thinks, to make the anxiety stop: washing, checking, redoing, counting, asking for reassurance. They bring relief for a moment, then the doubt comes back stronger. That is the loop.

Five things to know

- ☞ It's not a choice, a habit, or a quirk. Students can't just stop.
- ☞ It's not about being tidy. Many students with OCD have no cleaning rituals at all.
- ☞ Many rituals are invisible, happening only in the student's head.
- ☞ Students often hide it, out of shame or fear of what their thoughts mean.
- ☞ It responds well to treatment, especially when caught early.

What it can look like in class

OCD rarely announces itself. It often shows up as something else.

Checking and doubt

Rereading instructions many times, checking a locker or bag again and again, asking "Is this right?" repeatedly.

Perfectionism, "just right"

Erasing until the paper tears, redoing work, trouble finishing tests, needing things even or in order.

Contamination

Frequent handwashing, avoiding shared supplies, door handles, or certain classmates, long bathroom breaks.

Reassurance seeking

Asking the same question many times and needing the exact same answer.

Mental rituals

Seeming distracted or "zoned out" while silently counting, praying, or reviewing.

Avoidance

Skiping certain activities, rooms, words, or topics without a clear reason.

It can be mistaken for

Defiance, laziness, attention-seeking, daydreaming, or slowness. The student is usually working very hard, just not on what you can see.

What helps

- ☞ Stay calm and matter-of-fact when a ritual happens. Don't punish it.
- ☞ Separate the student from the OCD: "That sounds like the worry talking."
- ☞ Give reassurance once, then gently move on instead of answering again and again.
- ☞ Agree on a discreet signal the student can use when they need a short break.
- ☞ Allow extra time on tests and assignments when OCD slows them down.
- ☞ Break tasks into smaller parts, and accept "good enough" work.
- ☞ Work with parents and, when available, the school psychologist or nurse.

What to avoid

- ✗ Pointing out rituals in front of the class.
- ✗ Saying "just stop" or "it's all in your head."
- ✗ Joking that you're "so OCD."
- ✗ Changing classroom routines to fit the OCD without a plan. Accommodations should come from a plan agreed with parents and, ideally, the student's clinician.

Some accommodations help in the short term but can feed OCD over time. When a student is in treatment, ask the family what the therapist recommends.

Talking about it

With parents

Share what you have noticed, not a diagnosis: "I've noticed Maya washes her hands many times and seems very worried about germs. It's taking time from her work. Have you noticed anything similar at home?" Suggest they talk to their family doctor or pediatrician.

With the student

Keep it private and kind: "I've noticed some things seem really hard lately. You're not in trouble. Is there something that would help in class?"

Classroom support plan

Student

What OCD looks like for this student

What helps in class

Discreet signal for a break

Accommodations agreed with the family

Who to contact at school

Review date

Quick reference

OCD in the classroom

-  OCD is common, treatable, and not a choice.
-  Watch for checking, redoing, washing, repeated questions, and avoidance.
-  Reassure once, then move on.
-  Never point out rituals in front of others.
-  Plan accommodations with the family.
-  Refer to the school team and suggest a doctor visit.

Resources

nuanceocd.org Free, clinician-reviewed guides for kids, teens, families, and teachers, in French and English.

9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline. Call or text, 24/7.

Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868, or text CONNECT to 686868.

In Quebec Info-Social 811, option 2.



For your students: the Whatif stories help kids 7 to 12 understand OCD. Read them together at nuanceocd.org.

This guide offers general education, not diagnosis or treatment. Always involve families and qualified professionals. © 2026 Nuance · nuanceocd.org