

Anxiety and Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Information for parents and carers



ASD refers to a range of conditions which affects children's development. If a child or young person has ASD it affects how they see and interact with the world around them. This can make the world, for some children and young people, seem like a very unpredictable and scary place. This is partly due to the difficulties that children and young people with ASD have expressing their emotions, such as anxiety, to those around them.

Anxiety is a common emotion experienced by everybody which, if exaggerated or prolonged, can impact on a child or young person's life. However for children and young people living with autism, it is even more difficult to control anxiety responses once they are triggered.

A child or young person with ASD may find their anxiety increases when faced with the following challenges:

Disruption to routine

Familiar routines provide comfort and reassurance for children and young people with ASD. This can include consistent routines, use of a timetable, a familiar environment and interacting with the same group of children and adults. Children and young people may feel very troubled if a familiar routine is changed, even slight changes can cause a lot of anxiety.

Difficulty interpreting and understanding other people's emotions

Children and young people with ASD may find it hard to interpret and understand other people's emotions, facial expressions and social cues. This can mean that children and young people are uncertain about how they should react in social situations and interpret how others are responding to them. These difficulties may cause a child or young person with ASD to withdraw from social situations. A child or young person with ASD may also have difficulty distinguishing between accidental or deliberate actions (including sarcasm, 'banter', 'dares') of another person. This can lead to the child or young person misinterpreting the actions of others and becoming increasingly anxious or even paranoid about the actions of others.

Regulating their emotions

Another difficulty commonly described by children and young people with ASD is feeling able to regulate and manage emotions such as anxiety or anger. Children and young people may be more tearful or seem out of control. In extreme cases this lack of control might lead the child or young person to harm themselves, for example by banging their head or picking their skin, or unintentionally harm others. When possible, removing or reducing the cause of the anxiety or putting additional supports in place to manage the behaviour is often all that is needed. Consider reducing the noise in the immediate environment, providing a calming activity such as a self soothe box or providing access to a safe sensory space.

Regulating the environment

Children and young people with ASD may process sensory information such as sounds, touch or movement differently to others. They may be very sensitive to loud noises and environments with lots of people or movement. This can make certain environments such as the playground, the hallway between lessons or dining rooms very anxiety provoking.

Repetitive behaviour

It is common for children and young people with ASD to rely on obsessions or rituals as these help create structure in a world that appears chaotic and unpredictable. Things that you might notice include a child or young person lining items up or keeping things in a certain order. You may also notice repetitive movements such as rocking or fidgeting. These can provide comfort. It may seem as though a child or young person is not concentrating but know that familiar movements like rocking have been proven to help children and young people living with ASD to concentrate and process information better.

Tips to reduce anxiety for children and young people with ASD

One of the most helpful ways to reduce anxiety for children and young people is to make their routine and environment as predictable as possible. It is helpful to consider how you can adapt the environment (quieter room), the activity (a familiar activity) and/or the individual (use of ear defenders).

Routines

Children and young people with ASD will need as much information as possible in advance about any changes to their daily routine, such as a change to their teacher or their time for lunch. The use of timetables, social stories and visual supports can be helpful if these are not already in place.

Regulating environments

Some children and young people find ear plugs, headphones or ear defenders useful to reduce auditory stimulation in loud and busy environments such as gyms and canteens.

Some children and young people might benefit from spending 5- 10 minutes in a safe space where they feel comfortable to allow them to relax and practice grounding techniques.

Where possible, allow your child or young person to be in small groups where they interact with fewer people to experience less visual and auditory stimulation.

Regulating Emotions

Helping your child or young person to recognise any physical signs that happen when they are anxious, is an important first step in supporting them to regulate their emotions. This could be as simple as drawing their attention to what they may be feeling in the body when they are anxious such as sweaty palms or a faster heartbeat.

Draw an outline of the body and ask your child or young person to label parts of the body where they feel anxiety. If they can identify their early signs and have coping strategies at each stage of their anxiety (think of it being like an anxiety thermometer) this can be helpful to manage the anxiety at the earliest opportunity.

Some children and young people find it helpful to have a specific time to worry, if they continuously worry during the day. Ask your child or young person to write a list about all of the situations that make them feel anxious which could then be put away to be discussed at a specific 'worry time' each day. This can free them up to focus more successfully on other things.

Activities that may be helpful for children and young people include:

- Making a self soothe box – make sure the box includes an item specific to your child or young person from each of the senses as appropriate
- Counting slowly to 10
- Taking a break in a sensory corner/ tent / room
- Mindfulness
- Taking 5 deep breaths- some children find tracing their hand to be helpful (when your child traces up their finger with the opposite hand they take a deep breath in and when they trace back down the finger they exhale (continuing this with all 5 fingers)
- Doing a short burst of intense exercise- such as 10 star jumps or hopping on the spot
- Rehearse or practising situations that your child or young person finds stressful can help them to understand the situation in a visual way, with the addition of physical preparation as well
- Looking at a collection of favourite or special things

Remember too to work with schools and other professionals involved with your child or young person

- by working as a team you will be able to increase the consistency in the approaches between home and school and increase your mutual understanding of the child's and young person's world and how to help

Encourage your child or young person to practise these strategies when they are calm. Once they know the strategies well, you can gently remind them to try them when they feel anxious.

For more information check out bwc.nhs.uk/youve-been-missed

Birmingham's SEND Local Offer website <https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/localoffer>

Autism Education Trust website <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk>

Autism West Midlands website <https://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk>