



Schools and  
Families Specialist  
Services

# Autism & Anxiety

A Family guide to supporting young people  
with ASC and Anxiety



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## Autism - What is it?

Autism is a lifelong condition with four key areas of difference. The four areas are:

- **Interaction** – the way they interact, play and develop relationships.
- **Processing information** – their attention, interests and how they learn.
- **Sensory processing** – taking in and perceiving sensory information. This can affect all 8 senses: touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing, the vestibular sense (the sense of balance), the proprioceptive sense (body awareness) and the interoceptor (the internal sense which impacts on sleep, eating, toileting, self-regulating, the ability to socialise and Anxiety etc.). If your brain is getting the wrong messages you cannot interpret the correct signals to regulate and react appropriately.
- **Communication** – the way they communicate, understand and use language.

Young people and children with a diagnosis will have difference in all four areas even if it is not apparent. Learning to identify these differences and

putting things in place to support and teach strategies will give those with Autism the best chance of success.

## Anxiety

When someone has an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), they will experience far greater anxiety in their daily life than the vast majority of people. Anxiety is perhaps the greatest source of stress for those with an ASC and worry can be an almost constant companion, with intermittent episodes of intense fear or panic. *Tony Attwood* [/www.anxiety.org/autism-spectrum-disorder-anxiety-strategies](http://www.anxiety.org/autism-spectrum-disorder-anxiety-strategies).

Getting through the day – getting through even a moment – can be painfully challenging and anxiety provoking to students on the spectrum. The challenges that present from having Autism with the four areas of difference, can pervade every area of students' lives as they try to function in a social world. This world is full of influences that are beyond their control. Significant obstacles stand in the way of socialisation, engagement, communication, sensation, organisation, abstract thinking, learning, self-regulation. Moreover, since their coping skills are inadequate to compensate for their challenges, these students learn from experience to doubt their abilities. So anxiety is always on the burner (*Autism Spectrum in the Inclusive Classroom, Barbara Boroson, 2016*).

Many on the Spectrum have an intolerance of uncertainty. They need predictability and routine. In the modern world and in education it is difficult to always provide the certainty they need.

There can be key times when anxieties are raised. These include:

- Transitions/change/times of uncertainty
- Puberty
- Trauma
- Sensory and toileting issues not being understood.
- Friendship Issues
- Social Interaction – many girls become exhausted when interacting. They will cope in school but shutdown at home.
- Exams/Assessments
- School environment
- Children/young people not being listened to and/or their concerns are not taken seriously.
- Family issues
- Bullying
- Just after diagnosis
- Frustration when their Autism is not understood.
- Not knowing what to do or having the strategies to succeed.
- New or unpredictable circumstances.
- Identity issues.
- Inconsistency.
- Perfectionism.
- Negative experiences e.g. if child/young person perceived something negative had happened in a lesson they would then become anxious about returning.

## Behaviours

As your child becomes more anxious you will see a change in behaviour at home. It may include:

- ✚ Being angry from the moment you pick them up or they arrive home from school.
- ✚ Having more ‘tantrums’ or becoming angry at the slightest thing.
- ✚ Becoming verbally or physically abusive to parents and siblings.
- ✚ Refusing to wash, bath or take care of themselves.
- ✚ Refusing to get ready in a morning.
- ✚ Pulling at their own hair, pull out eyebrows, scratch or hurt themselves.
- ✚ Refusing to dress or dress inappropriately.
- ✚ When it’s time for school hiding away, refusing to get ready or refusing to get in the car/leave the home.
- ✚ Constantly upset or crying.
- ✚ Becoming upset if parents leave them.
- ✚ Reverting to childish behaviours or acting younger than their years.

## What can you do to support?

It can be extremely distressing for you having a child that **cannot** attend school due to the levels of anxiety they are experiencing.

Their behaviour may become extreme e.g. hitting out at you and their siblings, refusing to wash or dress, not leaving their bedroom. These aren’t unusual in a child/young person with Autism and high levels of Anxiety.

There are a few simple steps you can take to support your child/young person.

- ✚ Speak to school to discuss your concerns and to make them aware of why your child can’t attend.
- ✚ If your child/young person has been able to share their concerns or can tell you what is making them anxious and withdraw then share this information with school. It may be school can put in some extra strategies or adjustments which will support your child/young person.
- ✚ Limit the intensity of your communication /interaction with the child.
- ✚ Limit the pressure on the family to attend meals, family get-togethers.
- ✚ Let them know you are on their side and supporting them. It is really important to remind them of this.
- ✚ Adapt your language. Those with high levels of anxiety cannot cope with anything they

perceive as a demand. Re-word requests to allow the young person to feel in control e.g. Change - 'Come and get your dinner' - to - Your dinner is ready. Are you able to eat it now or would you like me to keep it warm for you?

- ✚ Always word requests as if you are giving them a choice e.g. would you like a bath or shower? Including one of the options you want them to do/complete.
- ✚ Respect the young person's safe place – this is often their bedroom. This may be the only space in which they feel safe and in control.
- ✚ Consider the sensory needs of your child/young person i.e. Loud noises, smells, food etc. They may appear picky about food, what they wear, toilets, noises etc. but these are linked to their sensory needs and is part of their Autism. The National Autistic Society has information around Sensory Needs which may be helpful. ([www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)).
- ✚ Engage in the child's focussed/special interest.
- ✚ Keep your promises i.e. times, duration of visits etc. – the child needs to know what is happening, how long for and when it's going to finish.
- ✚ Children with Autism and Anxiety find it difficult to deal with unpredictability and

uncertainty. If they haven't experienced something before they will not understand what to expect. Prepare them as best you can by explaining what will happen. Write this down so they have something to refer to. Try not to be specific about timings. Videos, pictures, YouTube etc. Can be a useful tool in helping them understand new situations.

- ✚ Provide opportunities rather than placing demands and expectations on the child
- ✚ Make home life as predictable as possible
- ✚ Allow the young person to feel in control – the neuro-typical world is a very confusing place
- ✚ Provide support to any siblings – give them opportunities to enjoy a break from a stressful home environment.
- ✚ Accept there can be good and bad days. The child may not be able to 'manage' something that they have previously been able to do if their anxiety is raised.

## Recommended reading / Resources

- ❖ The Girl with the Curly Hair '*Aspergers Syndrome and Anxiety*' by Alis Rowe (available from Amazon)
- ❖ The Girl with the Curly Hair '*Aspergers Syndrome: Meltdowns and Shutdowns*' by Alis Rowe
- ❖ [www.ipsea.org.uk](http://www.ipsea.org.uk)
- ❖ [www.schoolrefusal.co.uk](http://www.schoolrefusal.co.uk)
- ❖ [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)