

Anxiety and ASD

Excerpt from the NEW Teacher Assistants Big Blue Book of Ideas by Sue Larkey & Anna Tullemans (due out in March).

Research has shown that more than 75% of all children with an ASD experience INTENSE anxious feelings. I believe for people on the autism spectrum their two biggest challenges in education today are their *anxiety* and *lack of problem solving skills*. When I went to school and pre-school the programme was very routine and structured, with very limited choices. Today education is full of choices, open ended tasks and constant changes. For most students this makes it interesting BUT for students with an ASD, ADHD, ODD etc this creates many challenges. The start of the year often sees increases in anxiety.

Anxiety can look like:

- Avoidance of new situations
- Preference for sameness
- Rigidity
- Social withdrawal
- Anger
- Meltdowns
- Repetitive noise, movement or sentence

What programmes can help manage anxiety?

- Emotional Education
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (Tony Attwood Books)
- Relaxation Therapy
- Sensory Integration Therapy.

The Power of Preventative Breaks

Students self-regulating their anxiety is a VERY important part of their behaviour management programme. A student being able to request a break before a meltdown is a fantastic strategy.

You will need to teach them a range of strategies to calm themselves. When you are teaching them, you will begin to notice which ones are more effective at calming. You can then write social stories and use visual cards to help them remember what to do when they feel anxious.

Break Cards

Remember sometimes when anxious children with an ASD have difficulty communicating effectively, this is why we use visual cards to request a break. You can use in two ways:

1. The student requests the break.
2. You give the student the card as you see anxiety rising.

<p style="text-align: center;">BREAK CARD</p> <p>I can ask for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☺ Movement break ☺ Wall push ups ☺ Quiet place ☺ See Mr Jones 	<p style="text-align: center;">BREAK CARD</p> <p>I can</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☺ Take 10 deep breaths ☺ Count to 20 ☺ Hug myself ☺ Have a drink
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There are a range of strategies you can use for breaks and here are some to get you started:

Sensory Breaks

- Chewing (allowing to chew gum, chewy tube etc)
- Quiet area
- Listening to music
- Watching Liquid Timer
- Humming, rocking
- Sit under a table with blanket over it
- Carry heavy books, box
- Lying under a gym mat, weighted vest etc

Physical Breaks

- Mini trampoline
- Rolling on large exercise ball
- Star jumps, jumping
- Push up against wall
- Walk, run

Relaxation Breaks

- Counting
- Breathing
- Music
- Imaginary World (some students escape into an imaginary world, this is particularly common for girls on the spectrum)

Non Threatening Withdrawal: Diversion before Meltdown

- Send on an errand
- Get them to do a job for you

Solitude Suggestions

- Safe haven
- Special interest time
- Book to read
- Sit away from group. For example: If you are on mat let them sit at a table away from group or if you are doing group work and the room is noisy send their group outside.
- If you are lucky enough to have a small room off your classroom create a space for them to work there.

Matthew often needed time in his "little room". One day when I was in the classroom I observed him actually calling out answers from his room. He was still working just needed his own space.

Other Strategies

- Toilet, drink and/or food
- Talking to mentor

Remember: All of these strategies need to be taught to the child and practiced.