



School stress and anxiety – how it can lead to school refusal and impact on family life



Introduction

Autistic pupils can find navigating the social world of school confusing and difficult. Although they may appear to be coping at school, autistic pupils can experience high levels of stress and anxiety.

Often, their emotions remain bottled up until the end of the school day and released when they are at home, as here they feel fully loved and accepted. Families can see different behaviour at home to that at school and this can be distressing and even endanger families.

If the triggers for this behaviour are not identified and addressed at school, it can lead to regular school refusal and mental health difficulties.

Here, we look at school life, and how that can impact on an autistic pupil's differences and behaviour. We also talk about some common reasons for increased stress and anxiety together with strategies to overcome barriers to inclusion.

All pupils on the autism spectrum have differences in:

- **Communication**

Differences in understanding and expressing [communication](#) and language, with skills ranging from individuals who are highly articulate (but may lack understanding) to others who may be non-verbal.

- **Social understanding**

Differences in understanding social behaviour and the feelings of others, which informs the development of friendships and relationships.

- **Sensory processing**

Differences in perceiving sensory information. Hypo (low sensitivity), hyper (high sensitivity) to touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste, vestibular inner ear (balance), proprioceptive (body awareness)

- **Interests and information processing**

Differences in perception, planning, understanding concepts, generalising, predicting, managing transitions, passions for interests and ability to absorb auditory or spoken information.

School life – how it impacts on an autistic pupil's differences and behaviour

It's vital to understand why a pupil may be behaving in a way that is causing concern. By doing this you can make reasonable adjustments and provide the appropriate support to reduce or replace that behaviour and avoid school refusal. This can also help families who see [different behaviour at home to that seen in school](#).

There is no 'one size fits all' approach for autistic pupils. Each is an individual and the same [behaviour](#) observed in a number of autistic pupils may have different causes or functions. It's important to interpret a pupil's actions from *their* perspective.

Common reasons for increased stress and anxiety

- Transitions between lessons (noisy, crowded corridors).
- [Unstructured times](#) of day (break, lunchtimes).
- [Sensory](#) overload and/or fear of specific sounds.
- Working cooperatively in groups or team games in PE.
- Misunderstanding sarcasm, 'banter', 'dares'.
- Social issues – friendships, bullying, teasing, love, emotion.
- Lack of personal space.
- Unexpected [change](#) to the timetable.
- Coping with the curriculum and striving for perfection.
- Being away from the familiar routines, family and home.
- Disliking a particular member of staff or subject.
- Not processing instructions and misunderstanding what is required.

Strategies to overcome barriers to inclusion

Individual pupil

- Listen to what an autistic pupil thinks about their experiences at school. Ask how their day has been, but give closed options to avoid an ambiguous 'OK'.
- Have a home/school communication book.
- Use a behaviour diary to identify if there is a pattern to absences from school and incidents at home. Is the pupil trying to avoid a particular situation, lesson or person that causes them anxiety?
- Use visual stress scales eg a stress thermometer, or a traffic light system to help pupils regulate their emotions.
- Ask a pupil to determine the severity of '[bullying](#)' incidents using a visual scale, with incidents rated 1-10 according to their severity. Report those above an agreed point in line with the school's anti-bullying policy.
- Think about the impact of any co-occurring conditions that an autistic pupil may have eg learning difficulties, epilepsy, ADHD, visual or hearing impairments or problems with mental health.
- Consider that they may also have disturbed sleep patterns and problems with eating and toileting routines which can significantly affect their wellbeing.
- Work with the individual pupil to identify strategies which will help to reduce stress.
- Make reasonable adjustments at the end of the school day, such as allowing time for the pupil to engage in their own special interest activity or letting them leave before other pupils, if necessary.

Building relationships

- Arrange for a member of staff that the pupil has a good relationship with to meet them at the school gate, their parent's car or from other transport.
- Build a good relationship with the pupil to support their learning and sense of wellbeing. However, avoid over dependence on one member of staff.
- Support autistic pupils to build relationships with peers.
- Work with families to develop a morning and after school routine (encourage use of visual schedules, down time after school and strategies to relieve stress eg exercise, trampoline or punch bag).
- Work with other professionals, including education welfare. Ensure that they're all aware of the impact that the confines of school has on the autistic pupil and how that can cause anxiety and stress to them and their family.
- Organise [autism awareness training](#) for all staff, including lunch time supervisors.
- Use personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) lessons and assemblies to teach all pupils about accepting diversity and difference, including disabilities. A general assembly to [teach autism awareness](#) may avoid a particular pupil feeling uncomfortable.
- Ask parents what their priorities are for their child. You can use the AET parents' guide: ['Working together with your child's school'](#).

Enabling environments

You should identify any [sensory](#) differences an autistic pupil may have and consider how the physical and sensory environment will impact on their learning. With this in mind, you could:

- Identify a quiet and safe place that an autistic pupil can use, giving them an exit or time-out card so that they can access this whenever they feel overwhelmed.
- Provide a suitable work space in the classroom.
- Identify which aspects of the school day or physical environment are causing anxiety. Use a plan of the school and encourage the pupil to colour code areas where they experience difficulties.
- Look at ways in which the communication style of school staff might be changed to make it easier for the autistic pupil to understand and learn.

Curriculum & Learning

- Consider a short-term part time time-table to avoid school refusal, or to support a pupil who is returning to school after a period of school refusal.
- Encourage the pupil to give a mark out of ten for each lesson. For those lessons they score low, ask them why.
- Use intense interests to differentiate work so that it motivates the pupil. Consider making the curriculum meaningful and relevant to the pupil, addressing their aspirations and career options.

- Allow time to focus on specific teaching of social and emotional skills.
- Consider providing extra breaks during the course of the school day. Some pupils may need to be redirected to a different activity, have a quick run outside, or retreat to a quieter area of the school.
- Consider the way that tasks are presented in class. Break down text into smaller chunks and have photocopies of a lesson's objectives and success criteria to help the pupil understand what they need to complete.
- Differentiate tasks to make them achievable, but also sufficiently challenging.
- Allow time for the pupil to [process information](#), such as instructions and questions.
- Refer to the information on the [Teachers](#) section of the NAS website, including the resources available by [subscribing to 'MyWorld'](#).

Listening to what pupils on the autism spectrum are thinking about their experiences at school is vital. For pupils who aren't able to tell us in ways which we can understand, the views of parents/carers and others who know them well are crucial.

By working together and developing an understanding of the pupil's needs and providing tailored support, barriers can be overcome and every autistic pupil can be enabled to enjoy school and fulfil their potential.