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Stress and anxiety

"Sara is anxious and refuses to go to the toilet at school - she has a phobia about spiders."

Why does this happen?

- A child with autism may experience fear based on a connection made from a single frightening experience. A situation that has previously caused anxiety can trigger a fearful reaction, even an extreme over-reaction.
- Avoidance can allow this fear to grow out of all proportion. The child is therefore unable to learn that his fears may actually be without foundation.
- Children with autism can be overly sensitive to certain sensory stimuli, such as sudden noises like applause.
- Children with autism can experience stress from the everyday challenges of coping with change and sensory input. Walking out of class can be a sign that the child is suffering from unbearable stress.
- Children with autism lack a strong coping mechanism to deal with stress. This is because they have difficulty identifying their own emotions. Some do not have close friends to talk to about their fears, or they lack the ability to verbalise their fears and anxieties.
- Children with autism respond to stress in the same way as anybody else. They find it extremely unpleasant and try to reduce or avoid it as it adversely affects their ability to learn and function.
- When the child is stressed he is more likely to fail, this in turn leads to further stress.
- While we all experience stress it is a greater problem for people with autism because they experience severe stress far more frequently than most people do and they are less able to deal with it effectively.
- Children on the spectrum can be divided into two categories as to why they find it more difficult to cope with their stress. 1) They have a lack of recognition of their own stress in its early stages. 2) They lack the knowledge of what to do about their stress if and when they recognise it.
- Their lack of recognition stems from their general poor self-awareness. Children on the spectrum often have a less developed concept of their bodies and as such they find it difficult to know where parts of their body are in space without looking at them. They also find it difficult to copy another's movements.
- Children with autism often don't have close friends that they can talk to and confide in about their fears and anxieties.
- A small number of children with autism develop anxiety disorders such as panic attacks or OCD. This can be a sign that the child is experiencing severe difficulty with sensory processing and/or the social demands of school.

- The child may have learnt ways of dealing with stress that are inappropriate but work for him, therefore he sees no reason for change. You will need to be supportive, reassuring and help the child develop appropriate relaxation techniques to bring about a change.
- They also find it difficult to attend to, label and interpret the signals of their body and they often do not recognise particular messages as feelings indicating their mental states (anger, fear) or sensations indicating the physical state of their body (headache, thirst).
- In summary, children with autism experience the same feelings of stress and anxiety as everyone else, but they have difficulty locating them, are unaware of them or do not understand what they mean.

What you can do

- If the child has a particular fear, choose a time when he is calm, perhaps in an activity that he enjoys. Progressively expose him to the source of the problem. Visualisation can also be helpful, eg. help a child overcome a fear of spiders by visualising a dead spider in a far corner.
- Talk to the child's parents to find out if an occupational therapist has conducted an assessment and sensory profile.
- It is important to develop awareness of the signs that the child is stressed. He may not reveal his stress through his voice or body posture the way that other children do. The cues may be very subtle. Or the stress may trigger challenging or repetitive behaviour.
- When the child experiences stress, his ability in most areas will be affected:
 - his understanding of language decreases,
 - his ability to adequately express himself decreases,
 - his awareness of others and the cues they give is reduced,
 - he is not able to concentrate as well,
 - he will have difficulty focusing on relevant information,
 - his sensory systems will be over-stimulated so he won't cope as well with noise, visual stimuli and other sensations,
 - his ability to control inappropriate behaviour decreases, and
 - it is harder for him to use constructive problem solving.
- **Teaching recognition of stress.** Learning to pay attention to and correctly interpret the messages of the body is vital. Help and encourage the child to label feelings and physical sensations.
- Provide examples of a situation with accompanying physical sensation or emotion. Eg. "When I hear someone yell, I feel funny in the stomach, this is *worried*." or "Your face is red, you are frowning, your body is stiff - you're *angry*."
- Use a mirror or role play, find pictures, make a scene, play music, write a social story, talk about why / what happens to make a person feel a certain way.
- Once the child is able to label some feelings help him to identify situations when he might feel one of those emotions. Hopefully he will then learn to be able to identify beforehand situations that he finds difficult and then start to think about and be prepared to use coping strategies.
- Some children will appear quiet and compliant in class, but become aggressive the minute they get home. This indicates a high level of stress at school but is often misinterpreted as coping at school and poor behaviour at home. It is in fact a release of tension in a safe place. It is important to have open and regular lines of communication between parents and teachers to fully understand how the student is coping.

- Physical exercise (running, bike riding, jumping on a trampoline) is a good way of letting go of accumulated stress. Stress balls or a 'mad bag' that the child can take his frustration out on, may also be useful.
- Allowances may need to be made regarding homework. The school day can leave the child so stressed that he needs the evening to relax and unwind. Perhaps set aside some school time for the child to do homework or reduce the tasks he is required to do.
- Note signs of stress on the [Student Summary Form](#) - this will help other staff and relieving teachers understand the child.