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Self esteem and depression

Why does this happen?

- Students with autism are particularly vulnerable to teasing and bullying because their unusual behaviour and poor social skills make them stand out. Bullies may see them as a soft target. This can lead to poor self esteem.
- The student may find it hard to make and keep friends because he has poor social interaction and communication skills. Attempts to form friendships can lead to ridicule and failure.
- Others may ridicule children with autism because they are not skilled in team sports and ball games. Students with autism may not enjoy the activities favoured by their normally developing peers.
- Students with autism have reduced coping skills – they have trouble managing stress and anxiety. They can sometimes feel like they are out of control.
- While younger children with autism are less likely to be aware of their differences, older children may develop an awareness that they are different from their peers. Depression in adolescence is high. It is important for the child to develop positive self esteem from an early age.

What you can do

- Foster the student's interests and obsessions. Creatively work the student's interest into lesson plans. Allow him to share his expertise with the rest of the class. This will encourage and motivate him in his learning.
- Many students with high functioning autism have reading or other skills far beyond their developmental age. They can help to 'tutor' other students.
- Encourage students who have an interest in computers as they suit the learning style of children with autism. A student with autism might become the class 'computer expert'. Computers are not only a great learning tool; they are an excellent career choice for those with autism.
- Reward even minor improvements in behaviour.
- Students with autism are visual learners. Build on this strength. Reward good work or behaviour with a note of appreciation with accompanying pictures. This can be extremely rewarding for a child who is constantly being reprimanded for inappropriate behaviour.
- Encourage the student to keep a scrap book of his best work. This can be reviewed whenever he is feeling down.
- Help the student to monitor his moods – help him identify good feelings. You might say, "You feel proud that you did that!" and "That's a big smile - I can tell that you are happy."

- It is essential that the school policy on bullying and harassment is enforced to ensure that children with autism are not discriminated against. These students must have access to a safe environment free from harassment.
- Watch for signs that the student is experiencing serious difficulties and alert his parents if you feel he needs medical attention. Depression may not present in the 'classic' way. Signs may be a reduction in personal hygiene, risk taking or bizarre behaviour (climbing on roofs, playing 'chicken') or tiredness and irritability due to poor sleep. Medical assistance should be sought without delay. Anti-depressants can make a huge difference to behaviour.