

### ASD with High Anxiety

Some children with ASD experience higher than usual levels of anxiety. These children often present differently to those who are more classically autistic, and often those working with them cannot see the ASD behind the challenging behaviours. Staff may have implemented strategies recommended for children displaying a more classic presentation of ASD. These may have been unsuccessful. If you work with a child who demonstrates a need to be in control all the time, is very good at negotiating and can manipulate situations in order to avoid the demands of everyday life they may be experiencing extremely high levels of anxiety. These children often respond well to the flexible approach recommended for children with PDA.

Extreme mood swings are a common feature of this type of anxiety. When the child feels in control they can be charming and engaging, but when they are not in control they experience high anxiety levels which often lead to extreme and challenging behaviour.

Children with high levels of anxiety may appear to have better social, interaction and communication skills than other children on the autistic spectrum but lack depth in their understanding and are led by their need to control.

Children with high levels of anxiety can have highly developed role play and social mimicry. They may adopt different personas and use this as a strategy to avoid demands.

Children with high levels of anxiety can show obsessive behaviour which may be focussed on a person, e.g. another child or a member of staff, or on objects

### Things to remember

**These children are not naughty or malicious, although they are manipulative in the way they avoid demands. It is important to remember that underneath their robust exterior lies a very fragile and vulnerable ego.**

Pushing a child with high levels of anxiety to obey demands is likely to lead to high anxiety and 'meltdown' behaviour. This behaviour should be viewed as a panic attack. At this stage the child needs **REASSURANCE**, not to be blamed, or made to feel ashamed, as the child cannot help this behaviour.

Children with high levels of anxiety may be compliant and tolerant at school and then behave much worse at home. It is important for parents and teachers to realise that this is not due to less competent handling, but simply because by the end of the school day they have reached their tolerance limits and need to 'let their hair down'. It is important to communicate well with parents.

### Tips for managing in class

- A class room is filled with **DEMANDS** which often leads to increased anxiety levels for these children. The approaches recommended for PDA can be helpful.
- Instructions should be given in a **NON COFRONTATIONAL** style and you may need to practice 'asking without asking' e.g. "I wonder if someone might be able to help me do this..."
- Try to present **CHOICES** so the child feels in control of the situation e.g. "Would you like to write five sentences or six sentences?" or "We have to do these sums. Would you like to work them out using dinosaurs or cars?"
- Use a neutral tone and body language, giving the child space.
- Have a **SAFE** space with nothing in it where the child could go to by himself. Restraint should always be a last resort.
- When a child 'melts down' give lots of **REASSURANCE** even if they are swearing at you and lashing out. Try to think of it as a panic attack.
- Children with high levels of anxiety will have difficult times, when they are more anxious and demands must be decreased accordingly. Vice versa, they will also have calmer times, when more can be asked of them. Paying attention to their body language and signals will help you to determine which is which.
- Some children with high levels of anxiety avoid demands by using more subtle negotiation or other techniques. If not recognised this will be an obstacle to their learning.

### Other strategies which may help

- Distract and divert onto another activity to try to reduce the anxiety.
- Set challenges e.g. "I don't think you can do this by the time I come back!"
- Act incompetent e.g. "I can't do this, can you?"
- Give the child work without comment and leave them to it e.g. put the activity in a box which the child can open to 'discover' the task for themselves.
- Be flexible and unpredictable.
- Allow access to stress objects.
- Allow access to time out.
- Avoid direct instructions e.g. asking the whole group to line up, rather than the individual child.
- Use non-directive visuals e.g. a timetable or work system to reduce the number of instructions which need to be given.
- Use the child's own interests when planning work e.g. a special topic on snails rather than writing about Henry VIII.
- Introduce a reward system with highly motivating rewards. These should be easily attainable multiple times a day to reduce the chance of anxiety surrounding the system itself.

**Remember, every child is different. The key is working out what makes each individual child tick and adapting strategies accordingly.**