



**NORSACA**  
quality of life for people with autism



Nottinghamshire  
County Council

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# Extracts from “promoting emotional well-being in pupils on the autism spectrum – a guide for schools.”

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September 2010

## What is in this document?

This document has been written as a collaborative project with professionals from the following agencies:

- Inclusion Support Service
- NORSACA (Nottingham Regional Society for Adults and Children with Autism)
- Behaviour Support Team
- Anti-bullying Co-ordinator
- Educational Psychology Service
- SEN strategic services
- Speech and Language Therapy Team
- Parents, pupils and staff from Ashfield Comprehensive School & Valley Comprehensive School

It is not intended to be a step by step manual to working with children and young people with autism, but is intended to support a number of other resources and documents and to offer a guiding framework for everyday practitioners.

In particular, it is recommended that it be used in conjunction with the Inclusion Development Plan (IDP) [LINK TO www.aet-idp.org.uk](http://www.aet-idp.org.uk) – autism spectrum which can be found at [www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk](http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk). The IDP has been developed as one of the national strategies and is intended to support schools in improving their understanding of autism, sharing good practice, preventing underachievement and developing effective teaching and learning. The IDP provides a range of free resources and forms a detailed package of continuing professional development for staff.

The document was originally set out in 5 main sections, and these are two chapters extracted from the original document.

The 5 sections which are areas that schools have identified as those considered key to promoting the emotional well-being of children and young people with autism:

1. An introduction to the autism spectrum and emotional well-being
2. Developing self awareness
3. Coping with stress and anxiety
4. Developing friendships and relationships
5. Working in partnership with families

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## Stress and anxiety



### Why are children and young people with autism prone to stress and anxiety?

Stress and anxiety are likely to damage emotional well-being, for anyone. Why are children and young people with autism more prone to raised stress and anxiety than their peers? Children and young people with autism have differences in thinking, processing, problem-solving and interacting. This affects many everyday situations and has an impact at school, at home and in the community. It has implications for how children are supported in learning environments, on visits out of school, and highlights an additional need for support and understanding in working in partnership with families.

<b>Characteristics of the autism spectrum</b>	<b>Potential emotional impact:</b>
Have difficulty in terms of language and communication skills, regarding what they understand as well as what they are able to express	Being confused can lead to anxiety. Having difficulty expressing yourself can lead to stress and frustration.
Have difficulties in social skills which make it hard to initiate and maintain friendships, due to issues with social empathy and the perceived unpredictability of other people	Finding it hard to make + keep friends can be stressful. Being around people who behave unpredictably can be anxiety-provoking and stressful
A rigidity of thought processes which makes it challenging to cope with change or accommodate the needs of other people.	Preferring to do things in a particular way, + not imagining other options can lead to stress when things change or are different. New experiences can be anxiety-provoking if it is hard to think flexibly
A difference in processing sensory information which can lead to sensitivities	Sensory sensitivities can lead to overload which is stressful whilst happening and anxiety provoking in anticipation

## Potential factors contributing to stress and anxiety for children and young people with autism

### In social situations:

- Social interaction at break and lunch times
- Responding in class to group learning situations
- Making appropriate judgements about unwritten and unspoken rules of social behaviour e.g. when to be 100% honest
- Knowing what to do in unstructured times
- Fearing being bullied or victimised in some way
- Being in close proximity to others e.g. assembly/dinner hall
- Understanding differences in social 'rules' depending on whether you are talking to a teacher, a student or head teacher
- Coping with feelings of frustration when an injustice is witnessed (even if it is a minor infringement of school rule by another child or young person)
- Literal interpretation of humour or sarcasm may lead to social misunderstandings

### Regarding communication skills:

- Not always having adequate means or opportunities for communication
- Not understanding the need or priority of what to communicate, to whom, when
- Do not use a similar intonation, vocabulary or volume when speaking
- Find it hard to understand the 'bigger picture' which can lead to confusion
- Misjudge the usual pattern of turn-taking eye contact within interaction
- Not always understanding what is being requested of them whether that is socially or within a lesson

### Regarding rigidity of thinking:

- Worrying about changes which may happen (eg. wet break, or around Christmas/end of term time)
- Coping when change does happen (eg. supply teacher/swimming pool closed)
- Transferring skills from one subject or situation to another (eg. organising PE kit when moves class or department)
- Coping with different rules or requirements of different members of staff in different subjects
- Requirement to think creatively (e.g. drama, art, literacy projects)

## In terms of sensory processing:

- Flickering fluorescent lights
- Overly 'busy' wall displays (e.g. especially Christmas decorations)
- Cluttered environments – can make it difficult to know what to attend to, can overload and even make dizzy
- Noises that most people can 'screen out' (e.g. projector hum, radiator hiss, lawn mower outside, ticking clock)
- Sudden noise (e.g. roadwork, repair work in the building, fire alarm)
- May be particularly sensitive to certain very personalised noises (e.g. coughing, laughing, babies crying)
- Uncomfortable clothing (e.g. school tie, label in clothing, shoes)
- May be sensitive to certain smells (e.g. perfume, soap powder, school dinners, certain classrooms such as art room, body odour)
- May be sensitive to taste and find it hard to tolerate different tastes and sometimes even the touch of different textures (e.g. science 'experiments')
- May have sensitive balance system and find PE activities difficult, worrying or unnerving
- May be unaware of their own body space which may make it hard to sit straight or still for long periods, or may create issues regarding proximity to others.

## How do children and young people with autism show us that they are stressed or anxious?

Children and young people with autism can display a wide range of behaviours, some of which represent more than one feeling or emotion. It is important to know an individual well before making assumptions about them because of their behaviour. When supporting people who find communicating and understanding their thoughts or emotions difficult, it is particularly important to notice significant behaviours. Knowledge of particular individuals will let you become familiar with what is typical for them.

Common behaviours which may indicate raised stress or anxiety in children and young people with autism may include:

- **Repetitive behaviours.** These may be physically repetitive such as spinning, jumping, hand flapping, or vocally repetitive such as humming, repeating the same phrases or reciting a past event/conversation
- **Withdrawal.** Sometimes, under stress children and young people with autism 'shut down' and become very passive. It is important to distinguish between 'comfortable compliance' and 'stress-induced shut down'.
- **Crying, shouting, running away** etc. this is probably the easiest to read in terms of it representing an uncomfortable emotion, but it is important to remember that this may not represent the defiance it appears to and may indicate underlying stress or anxiety.

- **Refusal to comply/attempts to control the situation.** Whereas it is important to stand by certain boundaries with any child or young person, it is worth remembering that what has led to this difficult situation may be, in part, due to confusion or anxiety. In which case, an alternative response or strategy may be appropriate.
- **Physically, or verbally challenging behaviour.** This can take many forms and does of course require a 'safety first' response. With respect to verbally challenging behaviour, it is important to remember that there may be additional issues regarding a lack of awareness of social empathy and social taboos, but a learned behaviour of intention to shock or distract an adult. It is also worth questioning the underlying cause of the behaviour since stress, confusion, frustration or anxiety very often play a key role.

## What can schools do to reduce stress and anxiety for children and young people with autism?

In the light of current documentation and the new Ofsted framework, focusing on the social and emotional well-being of all children and young people should be a priority for all schools and organisations.

### Whole school approaches:

- Many features of whole school approaches are a reflection of ethos which recognises emotional well-being as important, alongside strategies to reduce stress or anxiety preventatively. Train staff so that there is knowledge and understanding of issues in this area (in particular that there may be a mismatch between the behaviour a child/young person is displaying and how they may be feeling)
- Use SEAL (DfES, 2005) initiatives and strategies across the school
- Use the means, reasons, opportunities model to help children and young people feel that they are listened to and have a valid contribution to make to decisions and choices
- Display school rules and expectations in clear and visual way
- Display timetables including any daily changes using visual strategies, signs, symbols etc
- Have quiet, safe areas around the school where children and young people can go at times of additional stress
- Maintain high vigilance and levels of support on playgrounds/at break times
- Consider any modifications which can be made to provision eg. if the smell of science lab/dining hall is too much for child or young person with autism, can they use an alternative room for some of their sessions?

### Small/class group work:

- Consider establishing a 'buddy system' or 'Circle of Friends'
- Assign certain tasks and make use of peer support
- Develop and value situations which promote social interaction and empathy

- Use a range of clear, concise and visual systems in the classroom to clarify rules, expectations, and organisational tasks
- Raise the awareness of other children or young people regarding how they can best help (e.g. teach the class signs and symbols)
- Keep the classroom environment organised and uncluttered and consider the sensory needs of the child or young person with autism

## Individual work:

- Use engaging and relaxing activities to **teach relaxation** techniques
- Use individual sessions to work specifically on **sensory needs**, or programmes of treatment/de-sensitisation
- Modify communication used with this child or young person to **maximise their understanding and their opportunities for communication**. Individual sessions can be used to teach these skills specifically.
- Value **personal interests** and preferences. These can be used as creative teaching tools and as motivators. They can also be used to reduce anxiety.
- For some children and young people with autism, **making choices** can be stressful, partly due to not understanding options and partly due to communication skills. Individual work in this area may be beneficial to practice the skill in order to avoid situations of feeling overwhelmed by choice.
- Actively **teach social skills**, scripts for playing, rules for games, social stories, SOCCSS system (Myles et al., 2004). This includes problem solving techniques with social skills emphasis so that social interaction becomes less stressful and more rewarding.
- Use discretion regarding **homework** policies. Can work be completed on site in order to remove another stress and potential flashpoint at home?
- Set out **clear boundaries** and provision for **unstructured time/breaks** which offer appealing and realistic alternatives for the child/young person with autism. It can also be helpful to use timers to demonstrate when an activity is going to finish, especially regarding preferred activities e.g. computer.
- Use personalised and achievable strategies to **take pressure off work load** e.g. access to laptop rather than handwritten work, sometimes fiddling with an object can actually aid concentration
- Ensure your school/organisation has a flexible outlook regarding its **responses to incidents of difficult behaviour**. This will require open discussion with all levels of management and families in terms of developing recommended effective strategies for individuals. One of the simplest for example, is to just allow time and space in a safe, calm area. Sometimes using a 'break' card during stressful situations can help
- Support the child/young person in developing their **understanding of their emotional state**, their ability to recognise and communicate it, and work together towards some useful strategies to reduce stress



- Offer the child or young person **regular times to meet with a mentor/tutor** who can talk through issues as they arise, help prepare for any upcoming changes, trips, tests, fire drills; can build a relationship of trust which will allow emotional awareness to be explored; and practice relaxation techniques

## Key points from this section.

- Children and young people with autism are often prone to stress and anxiety
- They will need effective strategies specifically teaching to them as their difficulties with self-awareness make it hard to develop appropriate techniques independently
- A shared understanding across the staff team is essential
- Working in partnership with families is also crucial
- Opportunities for communication should be maximised
- Raised emotional awareness is a key goal to developing skills which can be put into place before a situation becomes too hard



Pupil \_\_\_\_\_

Date of action plan \_\_\_\_\_

Staff/parents/other agencies involved in action plan

\_\_\_\_\_

What are we already doing in this area which is positive and effective?

What small changes (maximum of 3) could we consider to make improvements?

When will we reflect on the impact of these changes and discuss current issues?

Date for review discussion \_\_\_\_\_

## Friendships and relationships



### **Why are friendships and relationships a particular area of focus for children and young people with autism?**

Children and young people with autism will all share some combination of the central features of autism. This means that they are going to need additional help to make sense of the subtleties of social interaction, as well as to understand issues related to social empathy which will enable them to engage in social relationships. Positive relationships with other people play a significant role in emotional well-being for all of us.

It is important to remember that children and young people with autism want friendships and relationships – they may have additional needs regarding initiating them, maintaining them and understanding them. They also need people who support them to show additional sensitivity regarding the intensity and frequency of social interaction, which may mean they require more prompting than usual, and occasional breaks of solitude.

Children and young people affected by autism are likely to have difficulties regarding friendships and relationships in the following ways:

- Communicating their needs, choices and preferences in social situations
- Reading the non-verbal communication of social interactions
- Appreciating the impact of their actions/words on other people
- Negotiating and compromising
- Developing a less literal interpretation of language eg. sarcasm
- Understanding that other people have thoughts, ideas and opinions which are different and distinct from their own
- Predicting outcomes of situations which depend on an understanding and awareness of emotions
- Understanding problem solving options in social contexts
- Developing a resilience to some of the everyday nuances of interaction between children and young people which may leave them vulnerable to bullying
- Unstructured times of the school day may be the most challenging for children and young people with autism

## Why can bullying be an issue which affects many children and young people with autism?

Due to issues arising from the above list, children and young people with autism are often involved in incidents of bullying. Reports from the children's commissioner, the National Autistic Society, and Mencap show that children with special educational needs and disabilities are more likely than their peers to be bullied, including being physically hurt. They may have fewer friends which makes them more socially vulnerable, and they may not have adequate assertiveness or problem solving skills to protect themselves. They may regularly misread social interaction and, as a consequence of their social naivety, children and young people with autism can even become involved in a situation where they are contributing to the bullying. This type of situation obviously needs very careful handling, and a good awareness of the complexity of the diagnosis.

Equally, children and young people with autism may become involved in bullying behaviour themselves due to a different understanding of social interaction and emotional awareness. Situations like this will obviously need very sensitive handling by staff who have a good understanding of the complex issues involved.

What can school do to promote positive friendships and relationships for children and young people with autism?

There is a range of programmes of peer support which can help a number of children and young people in schools, to improve self-esteem and reduce feelings of isolation. It is also important to note, that these strategies do not only help children and young people with additional needs, but also benefit their mainstream peer group.

### Whole school approaches:

At whole school level, all schools are expected to have policies which reflect practice on special educational needs, inclusion, anti-bullying and safeguarding. These are likely to encompass a wide range of approaches, but there are some common themes of good practice.

Anti-bullying work should have two strands; preventative and responsive. Equally, in the instance of a case of bullying, support needs to be put in place as a response to both the bullying individual, as well as building resilience and assertiveness in the victim of bullying. Particular groups of vulnerable children and young people may need additional packages of support. Children and young people with autism fall into this group.

A whole school understanding of and approach to offering help in this area will also have the knock on benefits of reducing anxiety and potential challenging behaviour for a number of youngsters.

Children and young people with autism will need to be part of a range of whole school approaches to addressing bullying, but may need teaching in a more proactive and specific way. They may benefit from teaching strategies which teach social 'assumptions' more overtly, which are visual where possible, which aid generalisation, and which offer realistic situations in which to practice what they learn.

There are guidelines regarding developing good practice and policy available from the Inclusion Development Plan (DCSF 2009); Autism Spectrum Disorders - Good Practice Guidance (DfES 2002); Safer to Learn – bullying involving children with SEN and disability (DCSF 2009).

### Small/class group work

There are many strategies which are now becoming common practice across schools which may be useful for developing skills in this area. A brief outline of some of them is as follows;

- **Peer mentoring** – this refers to establishing a system of older/more mature children or young people having regular mentoring sessions with a younger one. They may meet daily or weekly, and will encourage open conversations about issues affecting them and explore appropriate solutions. These sessions do, of course also require staff involvement, advice and guidance. A key advantage of working in this way with peer groups is that there is often a greater willingness to share issues with a peer who has a good understanding of the realities of school/playground life than with a member of staff. In addition, there are frequently reported benefits to the peer mentor in terms of their confidence and self-esteem. (for further info visit [www.peersupport.org.uk](http://www.peersupport.org.uk) or [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk) )
- Peer tutoring – this refers to a system for supporting children and young people within lessons, where a more able peer can act as a ‘guide’. Children and young people in the same class are often more appropriate in terms of availability, but it is also worth considering older pupils. Further support and suggestions are available at [www.standards.gov.uk](http://www.standards.gov.uk) or [www.dcsf.gov.uk](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk) .
- Peer mediation – this refers to sessions where peers mediate for each other. It is more challenging for children and young people with autism to do this with their peers naturally, and this approach can build on models of good practice which are features of student councils, now common within most schools. For further information, see [www.peermediation.org](http://www.peermediation.org) or [www.teachers.tv/video](http://www.teachers.tv/video) or [www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk) .
- **Circles of friends** – this can provide a carefully selected group of people around an individual with additional needs to empower them regarding making choices and feeling an active participant in decision making. It can offer individualised solutions to specific problems as well as the opportunity to involve other children and young people who may themselves be isolated or lacking in self esteem.
- **Buddy systems & friendship groups** – there are a number of approaches which can be used across the age and ability range. Many schools have taken on this type of system as part of their whole school strategy for social and emotional well-being. For information regarding current approaches contact the LA inclusion support team.
- **‘Zippy’s Friends’** – a whole school package with multi-media resources to teach and develop social and emotional skills at Primary school level. [www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk](http://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk)

## Individual work

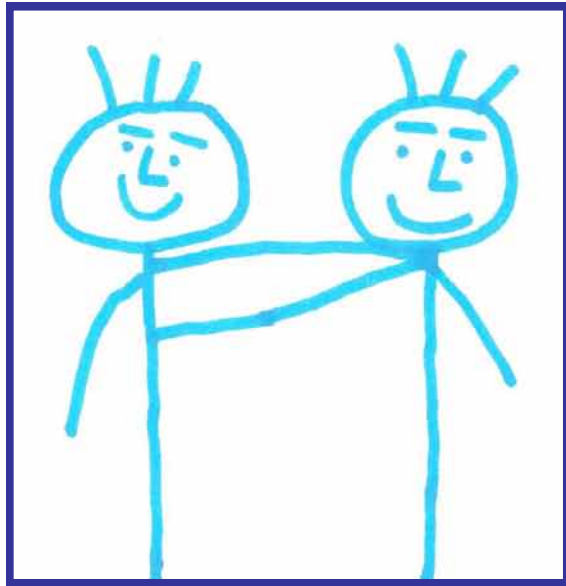
Children and young people with autism can benefit greatly from parts of their learning happening on a 1:1 basis, away from the distractions of group situations. As with work on self awareness, there is a place for some learning about social interaction which can focus on issues specific to an individual, within 1:1 sessions. Children and young people with autism often find incidental learning difficult therefore, taking time aside to address issues overtly, at their own pace can be very helpful.

Useful approaches to supplement this work may include,

- **Social stories.** This is an approach designed by Carol Gray. It uses a non-judgmental narrative to offer explanations of social situations. The aim is to foster social understanding, to help individuals read situations, predict outcomes and make appropriate and informed choices. There are many resources outlining the techniques of how to write a good social story, published collections of stories about a wide range of situations, and guidance available over the internet. [www.thegraycenter.org](http://www.thegraycenter.org)
- **Comic strip conversations.** This is another variation on using visual strategies to help clarify and explain social situations. It uses drawing to create comic strips representing a social experience and offers a means of exploring the differences between what people think and what they say; how people grade their feelings and what different options could have been available as alternative outcomes.
- **Talking mats.** This is an approach which uses individualised visual cues (supplemented by ICT resources in some cases) to facilitate children and young people with autism share opinions and express their preferences. [www.talkingmats.com](http://www.talkingmats.com)
- **Scrapbooks.** Many children and young people enjoy making personalised scrapbooks which include their own favourites and special interests. These can be developed to incorporate elements of exploring and explaining social and emotional information. They can also be an effective way of sharing information about the young person's thoughts, choices and future plans.

## Key points from this section:

- positive friendships and relationships are important for social and emotional well-being
- children and young people with autism may find difficulty in initiating, interpreting and maintaining positive friendships and relationships
- there may be particular issues associated with bullying which affect children and young people with autism
- there is a wide range of strategies which may be helpful. Features which are shared by useful strategies are that they are clear, individualised, visual and non-judgmental.



**Jason Aged 15**



Pupil \_\_\_\_\_

Date of action plan \_\_\_\_\_

Staff/parents/other agencies involved in action plan

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What are we already doing in this area which is positive and effective?

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