

## Stress and Anxiety

To be born with Asperger Syndrome is to be born anxious and feeling confused. People with Asperger Syndrome find social situations confusing and worrying: they do not know what to do, what to say, how to approach others and behave appropriately. They cannot read non-verbal communications such as body language; they can wrongly interpret the spoken word. Often they do not know how or when they are expected to act or reply, and they misunderstand non-verbal signals or verbal instructions from others.

Children with autism and Asperger Syndrome need structure in all that they do. Unlimited free time, a huge school playground, lots of noisy children rushing around - all these things will confuse and worry the child with AS. He will not naturally be able to join in or cope in these situations. The noise, movements and relationships going on around him will be beyond his understanding.

It is quite normal to feel anxious about certain situations. What is important is how we handle the stress or feelings of insecurity. Children with Asperger Syndrome may be seen skirting around the playground, alone and in their own fantasy world, or circling others during their play, never jumping in or being invited to join. Their teachers may describe them as "little loners".

Their way of dealing with these frightening social ordeals may be to run away from the situation and hide in a classroom, or their own bedroom at home. Another way to deal with the problem might be to shut down inside and ignore everyone and everything around them, or to vent their frustration and anger in a 'temper tantrum' or by lashing out.

If your child's school has told you that your child is not happy at breaktimes or lunchtimes, or his general behaviour is giving rise to concerns, or if you see something at home which worries you, try to find out when the worrying behaviour occurs. Is there something that appears to trigger his anxiety? Knowing when may help you to find out why.

### Stress management

Does he have a safe / quiet place he can go to?

Is there someone he can talk to who will listen sympathetically, and who will be there when he needs them?

Has he been taught relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises, Yoga, using the modern equivalent of worry-beads (squeeze ball etc)?

If his anxiety is caused by situations at school then those will need to be looked at carefully.

- Is he having trouble with his communication skills? What strategies have the school put in place to help with his social / communication skills?
- Does he know where he should be (timetable) at all times? Is his timetable on display with lots of pictorial clues?
- Are the rooms / areas / cupboards etc labelled so he can understand what happens in them, what things are kept in them? Again, picture clues are essential.

- Is he sensitive to loud noises / touch / prolonged eye contact / fast movements? All this will happen in the playground.
- Do his peers (and his teachers!) understand that he has a disorder, what it is called, and how they can all support him and help relieve his anxieties?
- Is he left alone at break and lunchtimes - is this when he feels most anxious or is teased, or is he having a problem finding his lunch pack / his table / someone to talk with? Can he eat his lunch at a special table just for him and one or two classmates, and then go to his 'safe place' for quiet reading?

### At school

Circle Time is about helping groups of people speak and listen to each other and understand how they can work together. It is also about helping individual members of the group understand more about themselves and how they feel, act, react and respond to the world in which they find themselves. It is about mutual acceptance, support and care for the other people in the Circle, whether or not they are particular friends.

Used properly, Circle Time can be a great asset in helping others in the class understand how people with Asperger Syndrome feel, and how some things which would not worry them, will cause great concern to the child with AS. Managing Circle Time is a very definite skill: do take advice or training before attempting this in any depth. There are many good books for teachers written on the subject.

Some schools set up a 'buddy' system, when two or three classmates have the 'responsibility' of taking it in turns to keep an eye on someone who needs help or support in certain situations. The success of such a strategy very much depends on the children's ages, and making sure that those given this job do not feel they are being asked to do something which is going to become an onerous chore. A small group of 'buddies' is preferably to just one: the child with AS may react badly if this friend suddenly wants to play elsewhere, or is absent for some reason.

### Instructions

People with autism and AS find verbal instructions (in the widest sense of the word) difficult. They are easier if they are written in words and/or in pictures. Each should be divided into its smallest components. Do not give a long list of do's and don'ts: "When you've done what you're doing, put your book back and choose another: don't sit and stare out of the window". When you've done what you're doing - well, I'm looking at the teacher ... put your book back and

choose another - What book? Back where? Choose another what? ... sit and stare out of the window - OK, I can do that. It's highly likely that the last few words will be the only ones remembered.

Things like timetables / shelves / drawers should all be depicted or their contents indicated in pictures as well as words. If he knows where he is, and what is around him, he will feel less anxious.

### Home

Some young people with AS are no trouble at all at school: their anxieties and frustrations are held in check until they get home. If a parent tells you - the child's teacher - that they are concerned about their child and describes behaviours that you do not recognise at all for this particular pupil, do listen and believe what they are saying.

### Tics and noises

When they are anxious some children feel they have to make a certain noise, a tic or a twitch. These noises - which are sometimes quite abrupt and loud - can be disturbing for others in the class. However, telling this child that he must not make the noise or do the twitch is like telling someone he mustn't blink - impossible! Try to come up with some strategies: if his hand-flaps, perhaps he could sit on them briefly. If he shouts, then perhaps a 'timeout' is an option. All teachers and classmates must understand and support him in whatever helpful strategy has been decided upon, eg: teachers should not expect him to stand up if he has to sit on his hands to control them.

### Other useful contacts

See also the **OAASIS Information Sheet Asperger Syndrome**.

**Excellent articles** on AS can be found at the American website for OASIS (Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support) at [www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger](http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger) and The National Autistic Society has information on Mental Health and Asperger Syndrome and also Understanding Behaviour at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk).

### The Mental Health Foundation

Has on-line information on anxiety, autism and more. Also has booklet The Anxious Child which you can download from their website and booklet All About Anxiety costing £2.00 (+p&p).

**Web:** [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

**Tel:** 020 7803 1100

**Email:** [mhf@mhf.org.uk](mailto:mhf@mhf.org.uk)

**The NSPCC** has produced a handy little booklet for children / teenagers entitled Worried? Need to talk? covering fear of violence, arguments, abuse, bullying, alcohol, drugs, sex, racism and other things which might be troubling. Available for a small charge from:

**Tel:** 0207 825 2775

**Web:** [www.worriedneed2talk.org.uk](http://www.worriedneed2talk.org.uk)

**Email:** [info@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:info@nspcc.org.uk)

### Parentline Plus

A national charity set up to offer help, support and practical solutions to anyone parenting a child from 0-18+ years on any parenting issues e.g. challenging behaviour, emotional wellbeing, teenagers etc. Offers local parenting groups and workshops, publications, a telephone and email helpline, details on where to go for specialist advice and training for professionals.

**Web:** [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

**Tel** (24 hours a day): 0808 800 2222

### Youth Access

Offers information, advice, counselling and support services by letter, telephone, fax or email throughout the UK to young people. Search their online directory of 300 UK agencies to find local support in your area.

**Web:** [www.youthaccess.org.uk](http://www.youthaccess.org.uk)

**Tel:** 020 8772 9900

### Young Minds

A National Charity committed to improving mental health of all children and young people through giving advice, training, campaigning and publications. Separate sections for parents, children, young people and professionals.

**Web:** [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

**Parents Info service:** 0800 018 2138

### Books and Software

A good publisher of books on all aspects of Asperger Syndrome can be found at [www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com).

**Moving School? 99 and a half Top Tips for Easy Transition** is a software programme to support children with special needs during their transition from primary to secondary school. It addresses social, communication and emotional issues. Available from [www.transitionsoftware.co.uk](http://www.transitionsoftware.co.uk) or tel: 07828 129918. They also produce 99 and a half Top Tips Presents Timetable Maker, a school organisation tool which creates daily and weekly colour-coded timetables.

Note: The OAASIS Information Sheets use 'he'/'his'/'him' rather than the cumbersome 'he / she'/'his / her'/'him / her'. No sexism is intended. The sheets are checked annually; please ensure you have the current version.



[www.cambianeducation.com](http://www.cambianeducation.com)

Cambian is the largest provider of specialist residential education and care for young people with Autism, Asperger Syndrome and other associated complex needs in the United Kingdom. Cambian is trusted by hundreds of parents and over 70 Local Education Authorities

### OAASIS publications

- SEN Information Sheets
- First Guide to ...
- Cards explaining 9 learning disabilities
- Legal advice Information Sheets
- SEN 'How to' guides

All OAASIS publications can be downloaded from [www.oaasis.co.uk](http://www.oaasis.co.uk)