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Anxiety and Autism in the Classroom

It should come as no surprise that children and young people with autism experience anxiety, especially at school. If we think about it, school is the place where they are going to experience the most people, most potential change and least amount control. They have to go, day after day with little choice about who, what and when. School takes up almost half of a child's waking hours and is set in a physical environment that may not be easy for those with sensory differences. And we haven't even mentioned play-time.

The triggers for anxiety can be many and varied but usually have a root which can be attributed to autistic processing, such as:

- social understanding with peers and teachers
- unspoken social or work task requirements
- unexpected change.

Something which I see causing anxiety in children I have worked with is rules which make no sense and which the autistic child will question in a way that other children often do not:

- Why do we have to do assembly?
- Why do I have to shake the vicar's hand?
- Why do I have to sing?

These children are not argumentative or challenging; they are confused and trying to overcome their confusion by seeking more data. Imagine a world where you have no choice but to follow rules that you don't know exist until you get them wrong, and rules which have no logical function. How would it feel? Constantly terrifying. You have no idea what comes next and how soon you will be told off for doing something that you didn't know shouldn't be done.

These triggers can also be cumulative. A morning which starts badly with a missed bus, a forgotten lunch or a strange teacher can escalate into a whole day of fear, uncertainty and anxiety for the child, which in turn makes learning very hard.

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To have the mental capacity to think, process and utilise incoming information becomes impossible if you are constantly on edge wondering:

- what will happen next (because you cannot guess)
- what you are supposed to be doing (because the teacher failed to give you sufficient instructions)
- why your classmates are laughing (because you didn't get the joke)

You end up becoming on red alert, fight or flight mode, where survival is all.

For this reason, and for the general well-being of our autistic young people, it is essential that we understand that their autistic thinking makes coping in a non-autistic world more difficult and scary.

Trying to deal with their anxiety in isolation is not the answer. Telling someone 'don't be silly', or to 'calm down', or 'you don't need to worry about that' doesn't work. Think about times when you have been concerned or upset and you've been told to 'calm down'. I am guessing that it made you do the opposite and feel like screaming at your well-intended pacifier! This approach can often make us feel that our worries are being trivialised and not heard, and that we are wrong and foolish to have them. This may be a message that our autistic child hears a lot: your view of the world is wrong and foolish.

What works better is to listen and begin at the starting point of the child. If the child is anxious about something, let's start there, in their world and not in our world where it all makes sense. Let's accept their right to feel anxious. Let's tap into this empathy thing and take a moment to imagine what it feels like to be that child...

The approach which makes most sense to me is that we need to be one step ahead and try to predict the upcoming situations and events that might cause anxiety to this individual child. The better you understand how your children are affected by their autism, the more relaxed they will feel because you will 'get them'. For example, if the child struggles with new people, warn them in advance, show photos of the new person, give them some details about the new person which they might find interesting – make the person less 'new', less unknown and more predictable. If the child finds verbal communication stressful, give them other means to get their thoughts across, music, drawing, Lego, computer graphics. It's all common sense really.

If you understand autism, you can work out how to fill in the cognitive gaps that result from living in a non-autistic world and it is these that can result in anxiety. The problem is not the child; it's the illogical, flexible, changeable world they are forced to live in.

Supporting the autism will lead naturally to reduction in the crippling and miserable anxiety that many of our autistic children and young people face simply at the thought of going to school. These are often naturally curious children who love knowledge and want to learn. We just need to make sure that school is an environment which allows them enough capacity to be able to do so.

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