



Managing autistic anxieties in school, in the classroom and beyond.

Jude Ragan,

Autism Education Specialist, February 2018



National Autism Project, (NAP) 2017

The Autism Dividend: Reaping the rewards of better investment

“Autistic people live in a world that was not designed by or for them to meet their needs. The very nature of autism leaves people exposed to much higher risk of stress from external demands, and a more frequent and severe expression of it. ” Ian Ragan, NAP report 2017

NAP Recommendation 5: Tackle environmental and other stressors.

“What is clear is that far too many children and adults with a learning disability and/or autism who display behaviours that challenge either themselves or others find themselves accommodated for long periods in unsuitable inpatient settings. More than a third of the 2,600 people with learning disabilities in inpatient settings are autistic, but progress in moving them out of inpatient settings has been slow.” NAP report 2017, referring to the Transforming Care Programme.

'The Future I'd Like to See', NAP Short Essays 2017

"It should not take a sociologist to figure out that high rates of self harm and suicide within a population are suggestive of a social issue, likely isolation and marginalisation."

Dr. Damian Milton, NAP short essays.

"Costs of every sort are incurred by both individuals and society because of an unmet need to understand, accept and deal with fluctuating autistic capacity to engage effectively. When the low times happen, it is not for lack of goodwill, it is from genuine (possibly brief) incapacity; being treated with belief and understanding it a vital element in acquiring or regaining capacity."

Dr. Dinah Murray, NAP short essays.

"Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period, but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life." DSM-5

All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA)

'Autism and Education in England 2017'

'From 2018 autism will be included in Initial Teacher Training Courses.' Cheryl Gillan MP, (APPGA report published in late 2017 as we near the 10th anniversary of the Autism Act 2009)

They found that:

- Fewer than half of children and young people on the autism spectrum say they are happy at school.
- 6 in 10 autistic children said that the main thing that would make school better for them is having a teacher who understands autism.
- Fewer than 5 in 10 teachers say that they are confident about supporting an autistic child.

Key recommendations for schools:

- Training in autism for school staff and governors, and training in the requirements of the SEND CoP
- Reasonable adjustments for ASD pupils in schools
- Provision of a specialist curriculum for all ASD pupils who need one
- Measures to reduce bullying and promote inclusion
- Measuring progress of ASD pupils and recording where they are going after leaving school to help assure themselves that they are equipping ASD pupils as effectively as possible for adult life

The Intense World – Everything Happens So Much

Temple Grandin (2014) refers to “The Intense World Theory” where too much information coming into the brain may cause the autistic person to experience the world with an intensity that is painfully intense. The suggestions therefore are that in such a case the brain might lock the autistic person into a small range of comforting repetitive behaviours, or that, when the world around an autistic person is moving too fast for them they withdraw from their surroundings in order to cope.

“In either case the lesson isn’t that some people with autism receive too much information and are therefore over-responsive while other people with autism receive too little information and are therefore under-responsive. The lesson is that if your brain receives too much sensory information, your acting self might easily *look* under-responsive but your thinking self would *feel* overwhelmed.” Temple Grandin, pp 84.

Many autistic authors refer to the benefits of stimming (rocking, flapping, twirling, noise-making), describing it as similar to white noise, providing a self-managed constant which then allows them greater ability to filter sensory experienced, helping them to process the world around them.

Firstly, we need to reduce stress and anxiety.

Reduce stress by:

1. Knowing about autism and what general stressors are likely to apply (lack of understanding about autism, sensory overload, bullying, isolation, etc).
2. Knowing each of your autistic students and knowing the triggers to their stress, what it looks like and what you/the school can do to reduce it.
3. Know that an autistic child who is suffering high levels of stress may well be feeling scared, although the way they demonstrate that may look more like defiance or being difficult, it is not.
4. If an autistic student is becoming over-aroused or anxious, keep calm, talk to them quietly, do not touch them but allow them to carry out a plan you will have put into place for such eventualities. This may include use of sensory integration, time to work away from the class in an agreed calming space, involvement in a special area of interest, etc.
5. At this point reduce demands, reduce sensory input – eye-contact for instance. This is not the time for reasoning with them, talking to or at them, the talking and revision of the plan comes later, once they are calm.
6. Be supportive and understanding and don't take it personally. Foster a feeling in them that school is a place that they are able to be a part of.

Secondly, we need to teach resilience.

Definitions of resilience:

- 'buoyancy – the ability to bounce back from hard times'
- 'ability to thrive despite adversity'

"Without resilience, autistic children can go through life finding things increasingly challenging and become more and more anxious about taking on new activities. They may become autistic young adults who cannot engage with society, leading to wasted potential for that person and the wider world. Their anxiety will increase exponentially, whereas with the development of resilience, anxiety may not cease but it will peak and trough with lower and less frequent peaks." (Purkiss and Goodall, 2018)

Intrinsic factors that affect resilience include self-esteem, social competence, capacity for problem-solving, planning competence. Being able to plan, monitor and regulate behaviour and adapt as circumstances change enables children with resilience to respond to adversity and continue to thrive.

Research into resilience finds that 'connectedness to school' is a key factor. It is defined as a school where children feel that the school cares for them, that they can turn to at least one trusted adult to whom they could talk, feeling safe at school.

"Teacher behaviours that were most highly associated with student confidence in using their teacher as a source of help were relational in nature, including when the teacher is someone who says hello to them, talks to them, or shows they are proud of them and takes an interest in what they do." (Cahill et al 2014)

Nurturing and teaching resilience in the autistic child

1. **Validation:** letting the autistic student know that you think “they can”, letting them know that we think they will be able to achieve with our help, rather than any more negative view. Invalidation impacts on self-image and self-esteem. A child who has only been told what he can’t do is unlikely to have a high level of resilience.
2. **An assumption of competence:** assuming for instance that an autistic person will not be able to learn something, or manage independence skills. (Bill Nason, 2014, describes teaching methods that allow an autistic student to feel safe, accepted and competent.)
3. **Exposing to situations that are challenging yet manageable:** if we have low expectations of autistic children, if we see the need to shield them from what we perceive to be difficulties for them, then this leads to their own self-doubt which in itself impedes future resilience.
4. **Demonstrating to them that they have overcome previous failures:** if this can be overtly taught and celebrated then the autistic child is more likely to attempt new experiences in the future and so build their resilience.
5. **Giving permission to be less than perfect:** many autistic students fear failure and will strive to complete an activity perfectly, and when this feels like a failure it can prevent them from attempting future challenges, feeling that nothing they do is likely to be good enough. We need to teach them that things are acceptable when not perfect, things can always be improved upon at a later date if necessary. It is helpful to provide a reasonable time frame in which a task should be completed.
6. **Teaching through their special interest:** we know this will be motivating for them and that they are already likely to have a good level of knowledge about this subject, and are willing to research further. This can therefore be used to allow for success and therefore build self-esteem and resilience.

Planned activities that are less stressful for autists:

Teaching and learning styles that are more likely to engage an autistic student:

1. Allow for playing alongside rather than with.
2. Make the environment as predictable as possible.
3. Individual work/research is likely to be more productive than group work.
4. Using their special interest.
5. Accept stimming for what it is, that is a comforting background soother, and other self-soothing mechanisms or objects.
6. Making something irresistible (eg, Gina Davies' Attention Autism or Shakespeare Schools' Foundation)
7. Use social stories to explain consequences of social behaviour and learn new strategies.
8. Having high yet achievable expectations for learning and behaviour.
9. Explicitly teach life skills such as problem-solving and coping skills that allow for their autistic starting points.
10. Model praise and excitement for the strengths of the autistic child so that peers learn the same.

Most of all, know this child and how their autism affects them, how you can help and support them to reduce their anxiety and increase their resilience in order for them to thrive, to feel safe accepted and confident, help them to take their skills learned in school to life beyond.

References

APPGA (All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism) “Autism and Education in England 2017”
AGGPA/Axcis Pub, 2017.

Cahill, H., Beadle, S., Farrelly, A., Forster, R., Smith, K., “Building Resilience in children and young people”, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, 2014

Americal Psychiatric Association, “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” Fifth Edition, 2013

Grandin, Temple and Panek, Richard. “The Autistic Brain – Helping Different Kinds of Minds Succeed”,
Mariner Books Pub, 2014

Nason, Bill, “The Autism Discussion Page on the Core Challenges of Autism”, Jessica Kingsley Pub, 2014

Purkiss, J., and Goodall, E., “The Parents’ Practical Guide to Resilience for Children on the Autism Spectrum”, Jessica Kingsley Pub, 2018

Shakespeare School Foundation: www.shakespeareschools.org