Anger and anxiety in the classroom: Higher functioning autism and Asperger’s

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The child with Autism is constantly struggling with anxiety.
If we can reduce the anxiety, the learning will increase.

Seeking comfort from familiar behaviours
Difficulty predicting the outcome of events
Automatic release of adrenalin leads to heart rate increase, rapid breathing, temperature increase
Fight or flight

Challenging Behaviour

• ‘Children with ASD may display what appears to be aggressive behaviour, but this is not really an appropriate description for what we see in individuals with ASD.’
• ‘More often than not it is a reaction to events and there will be little awareness of their actions.’

*Managing and preventing Challenging Behaviour*  
Rita Jordan
Specific behaviour
Underlying factors

Angry Outbursts

ANXIETY!

Challenging behaviour in children with Autism is almost always functional rather than deliberately malicious.

Behaviour is communication

Under the autism umbrella...
Pathological Demand Avoidance
- On the surface sociable and verbally able
- Feels intolerable pressure from normal expectations
- Avoidance can be the greatest social and cognitive skill
- Strategies used are socially manipulative

Building relationships

No strategy is likely to be effective without first building positive, trusting relationships

Tackle confusion and ambiguity in the classroom

Clear expectations
Good - Sitting

Preparation for change
Visual timetables

Whoops!
Don’t worry if children don’t want to talk about their day.

Preparing for school

- Talk through the lessons/timetable for the day
- Don’t worry if children don’t want to talk about their day
- Taking something from home

Communicating worries

- Asking for help
- Writing letters
- Worry boxes/books

A lot of our young people feel...

- Everything that other people do seems ‘out of the blue’
- A robot drives me and it does naughty things
- Everything I do is wrong
- I hate that I am different

There can be another way...

- I may have autism, but it won’t stop me from being a super star learner

Learning about autism

- There are lots of resources available from Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Teach relaxation

- Deep pressure and sensory input
- Aromatherapy
- Breathing exercises
- Time Out (caution!)

I am Special

Different Like Me
Build Self-esteem

- Praise books
- Rewards

Allow time for motivators

- For rewards
- To motivate reluctant learners

Motivators may be needed more when anxiety levels are already high

Peer Relations

- Guided play
- Peer Education

Remember that lots of young people with autism need a break at play times. Classrooms are social places and many young people feel overwhelmed.

Understand Emotions

- Incredible Five Point Scale
- Adult modelling and labelling feelings

Give information

Understand Emotions and motivations

- Comic Strips Conversations
- Practice with fiction first, then move on to real life

Conflicts

Be aware that young people with autism are vulnerable to being bullied and many experience conflicts with peers in school. They can also seem to become bullies themselves, although this usually due to either seeking acceptance or a lack of understanding/social context.

Tony Attwood – Scales of Justice
Teach problem solving

Logic Diagrams – Peter Vermeulen

Consider sensory factors

Proprioception – our awareness of where our body is positioned and what it is doing

Vestibular system – our sense of balance and our awareness of were we are in space

Avoiding a downwards spiral

Refusal can become routine

Increased anxiety can lead to controlling behaviour

Break patterns

Find reasons to be positive

Anger in the classroom

Reward = repeat

Top tips: Plan for prevention

Remember sensory factors

Teach relaxation

Recognise stress / anxiety

Consistency

Limit language

Show visuals

Stay calm and slow down

If safe, stand back and observe

Structure events (e.g. now/next)

Change of face

Conclusion

‘People are always looking for the single magic bullet that will totally change everything. There is no single magic bullet.’

Temple Grandin