

Understanding Challenging Behaviours in Children with Autism

Everyone displays 'challenging behaviours' at some time because it is a way of communicating what they are thinking or feeling. Those with autism may seem to display challenging behaviour more frequently than other children but this is because they see the world differently.

They do not always understand social rules, may have difficulty expressing themselves and may struggle to cope with changes in routine and understanding how other people may be feeling, all of which can lead to very stressful situations for them. This, together with any sensory issues they may have, can be overwhelming for them to deal with and their only way to cope and to let you know that they are struggling is through inappropriate or 'challenging' behaviour (sometimes described as tantrums, rage and meltdowns).

Anxiety is a common cause of challenging behaviours amongst children with an ASD. High levels of anxiety in children with an ASD are often a common feature.

Children with an ASD are typically unable to communicate their feelings of anxiety, and may present with behaviours that you do not typically associate with feeling worried or anxious.

These might include:

- tantrums and aggressive behaviour
- becoming withdrawn and resisting any interaction with others
- complaining of pain or illness
- engaging in repetitive behaviours
- hurting self

Difficulties in understanding language, predicting others, sensory issues alongside other issues can all cause anxiety, and this is why anxiety common amongst children with an ASD

We all experience anxiety, it is part of our everyday life and we all react to stressful situations in a way which is personal to us, but the symptoms of anxiety are often similar. Think of a time when you have felt anxious, you may have experienced feelings such as being scared, panic, increased heart rate, sweating, sickness, not knowing where to turn or what to do next, loss of confidence etc. These are unpleasant feelings and can impact our mood, energy levels and behaviour, so imagine what it must be like to feel anxious every day of your life but not understand why.

Common situations that trigger anxiety are:

- meeting strangers
- being given too many choices
- not being able to communicate their needs
- changes in routine
- new activities or places
- experiencing unpleasant sensations, eg dog barking, flashing lights, crowded and noisy environments, overpowering smells
- transition from one activity to another — even small transitions
- trauma - remembering unpleasant events eg having a haircut, seeing the dentist or doctor, which when being asked to repeat makes them anxious

Sometimes, children with an ASD can be anxious about more than one thing at a time.

Before attempting to address challenging behaviours, it is essential that you identify the causes and / or reinforcing factors. Without doing this, your interventions may lead to increased distress and a likely worsening of behaviours.