

# ASD Family Help

## Autism & Anxiety

Understanding & Supporting our Children

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# Learning Objectives

Identifying	What is Anxiety, it's causes and how it impacts our young people
Learning	How to support our young people by amending and changing our approach to help them feel safe and relaxed.
Looking	Looking at some approaches and techniques to support our autistic young people



# What is Anxiety

Something we all experience

“a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome:” (oxford dictionary)

Everybody experiences anxiety at some point in time.

It becomes a problem when it **STOPS** your child from enjoying normal life by affecting their school, work, family relationships, friendships or social life

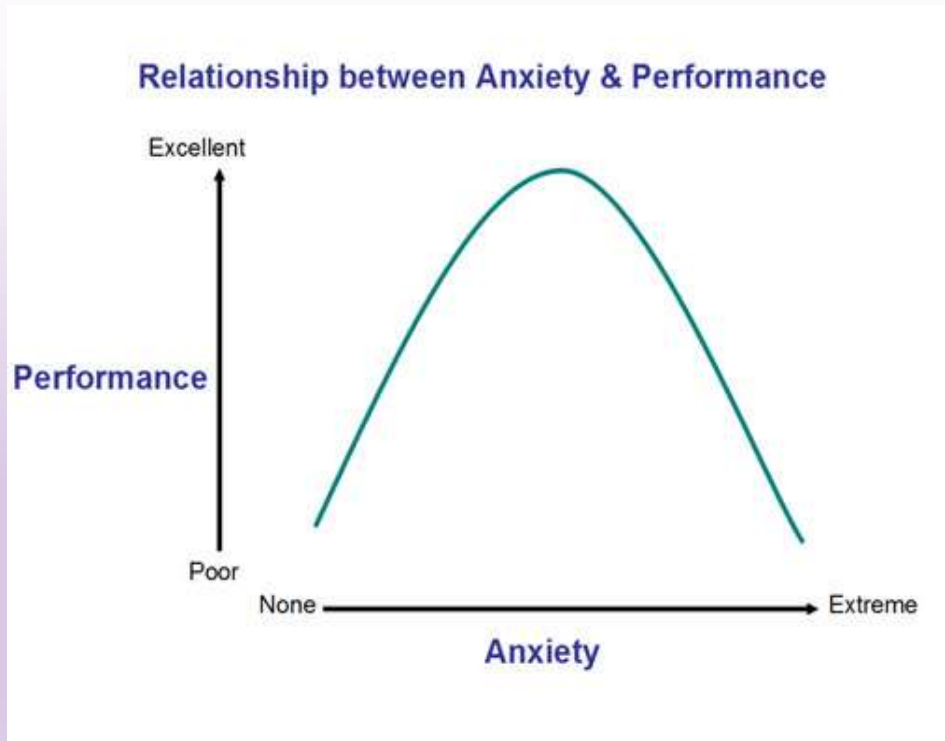
# Different Kinds of Anxiety

**Separation anxiety:** fearfulness re: safety of self and loved ones. My mum will have a car crash – A monster will come into my room – I will miss you and cannot cope – you will forget to pick me up

**Social anxiety:** associated with shyness, fear of embarrassment, social inhibition. I will get told off – People will laugh – No one will like me – People will think I am stupid – I don't know to say or do

**Generalised anxiety:** excessive worry about daily events, past & present (e.g., homework, tests, popularity, health...). I will do badly at my work – I will fail – My friends and I will fall out – I am not going to be able to get to sleep – something bad will happen

# Relationship between Anxiety & Performance



▶ A bit of worry can help us – it can enhance our performance, by making us more alert and tasked-focused.

▶ However too much anxiety over a longer period of time can begin to interfere with our performance. Our ability to concentrate diminishes as we shift away from the task.

▶ When anxiety overstays it's welcome, exhaustion results. Which can lead to burnout / shut down / meltdown

▶ We are not designed to perform well under these conditions

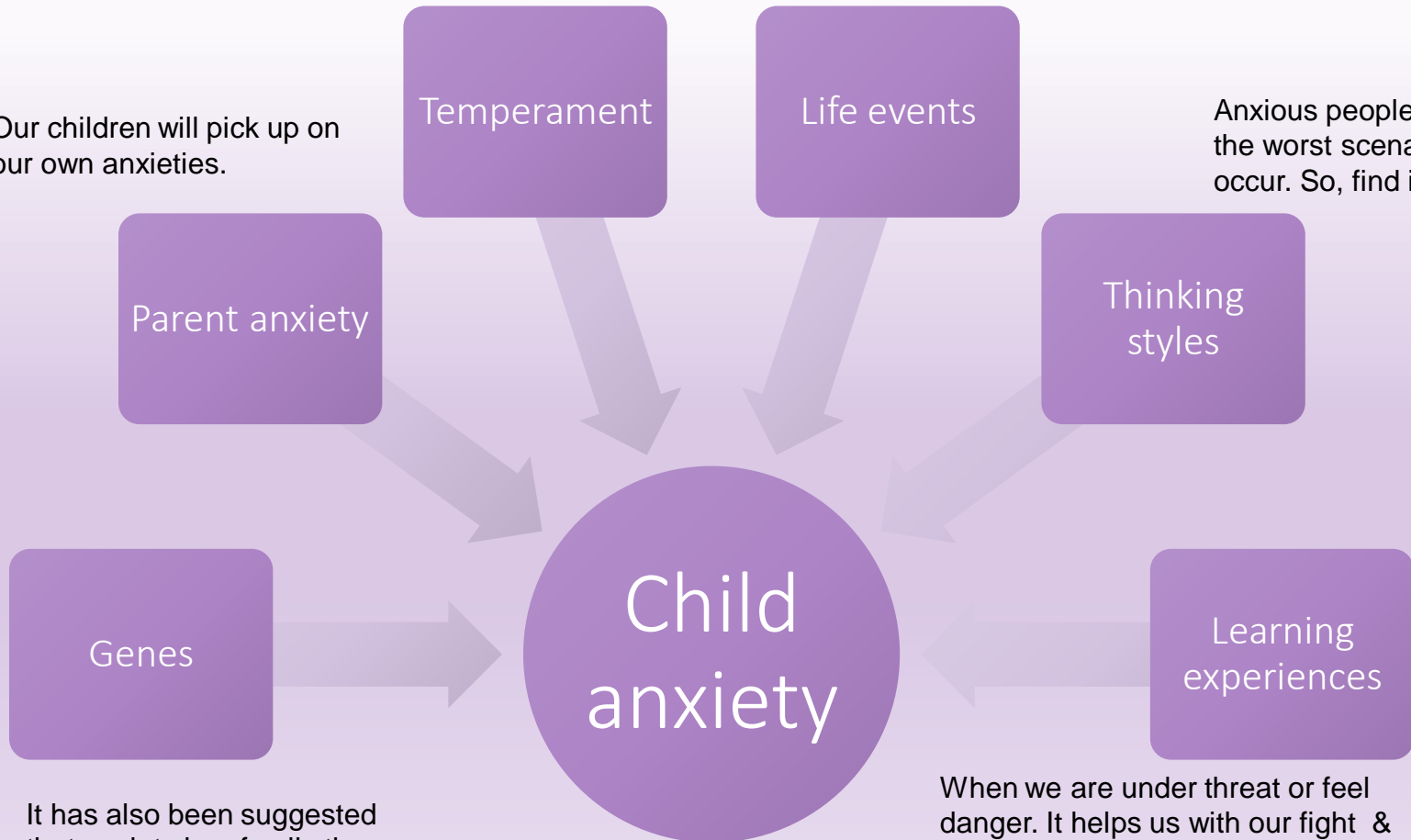
# Why do children become anxious?

Often, we develop anxiety following a series of stressful life events – so this can include school as well as family issues

We do have to consider the ALN as well their own sensitivities

Our children will pick up on our own anxieties.

Anxious people tend to expect the worst scenario will always occur. So, find it hard to relax



It has also been suggested that anxiety has family ties.

When we are under threat or feel danger. It helps us with our fight & flight preparing us for a quick response

# Indicators of anxiety :

- ▶ Sleep Issues
- ▶ Increase use of toilet
- ▶ Eating issues
- ▶ Feeling irritability or down
- ▶ Increase in obsessions
- ▶ School – Non attending
- ▶ Repetitive questions
- ▶ Dealing with change
- ▶ Tummy aches
- ▶ Avoidance or refusals
- ▶ Masking / Shutting down
- ▶ Separation difficulties
- ▶ Volume
- ▶ controlling
- ▶ Self-harming
- ▶ Burnouts / Exhaustion
- ▶ Withdrawing from social contacts/activities
- ▶ Destructive behaviour /anger/ everything is boring!
- ▶ Headaches / tension
- ▶ Inappropriate laughter
- ▶ Sensory seeking
- ▶ Tearful

It's so important that we help them feel safe



# Learning to Beat Anxiety

Remember there are times when we **ALL** feel worried, anxious, uptight or stressed. This is **NORMAL** and often there is a reason.

Other times these feelings can feel so strong that they take over and **STOP** us from doing the things you want to or must do in life.

We just want to hide...

When this happens, we try to take control and learn how to beat these feelings. Often our children lose control, become overwhelmed and distressed, help and guide them with this. There can be days of the build-up and then afterwards days to feel better.

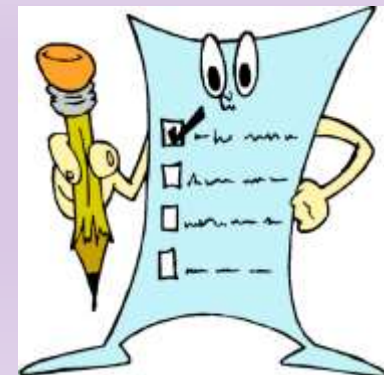




# Ideas and tips to think about

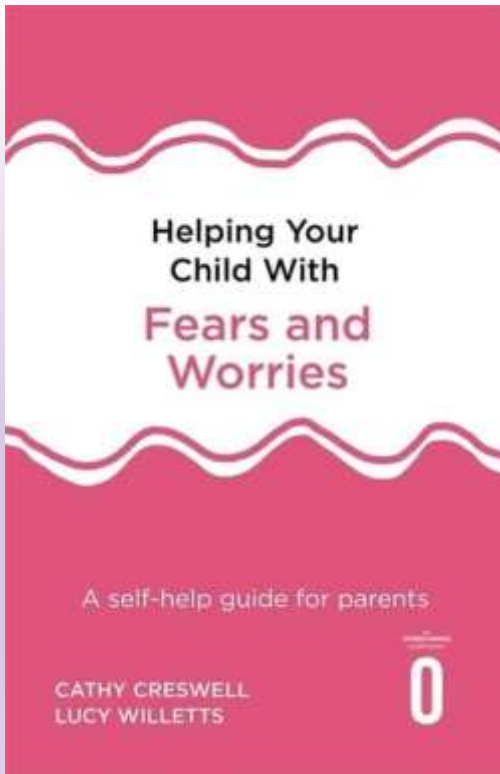
- **Modify your expectations** - When things don't meet **your expectations**, it can lead to **negative feelings**. Consider their emotional age and what they can do – beware of the level of your child's needs.
- **Modify the environment** – be aware of your child's sensory difficulties – the environment often can play a big part in anxiety
- Look at how you can support their **executive functioning skills**
- **Present it visually** – timetables, write lists, **create structure**. It helps to take away uncertainty. Make some parts of the day that always happen the same time in the same way

- Let them know, how long, where and when
- Let them know what to expect - be honest
- Let them know you are there and on their side / collaborate with them
- Be available to play and talk to them



- **Prepare** - if you think something is going to be problematic

# Helping Your Child With Fears and Worries



Addresses specific fears and phobias as well as general anxiety and 'worrying'.

Provides step-by-step practical strategies.

Includes case studies, worksheets and charts.

Encourages you to help your child problem solve for themselves

Based on the authors' experience at their anxiety disorders clinic at the University of Reading and developed from a programme based on working almost exclusively with parents.

# There are five steps to help your child overcome their fears:

## **1st Step: understanding your child and their anxiety**

- What makes your child anxious?
- What are the signs that you have noticed?
- How does it feel in their body?
- Identifying and recognising them in your child can really help.
- Put together visuals to help them understand – you may have to work on their emotional regulation skills



# Step 1: Talk about Fears and worries

Encourage your child to be open about any fears and worries - This won't make it worse, be honest and accurate. However, listen, please do not judge, long pauses are ok. Encourage them to talk freely.... **They may struggle to explain what is happening or what they are feeling, but may expect you to understand**



- Tell them what makes you anxious when you were young
- Ask them what makes them worry, using open questions.
- What do they think will happen? You can look at the evidence
- Use comic strip conversations or social stories or just general drawing / doodling on a page can help
- Give an older child a feelings journal
- Music (lyrics) may help/poetry/ images google or books
- Timing and the way you ask are important considerations.
- Sometimes take the worry away for them

***Your empathy will increase the chances that your child will accept your guidance and discuss his or her fears with you in the future.. Try not to be critical or express frustration. Accept their worries are real for them. Sometimes we do not have the answers, we can only be there to support them and acknowledge how they feel***

Anxiety: Where do I feel it in My body?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



What kind of things make me feel anxious?

school      tests      parties  
food      Mum and dad fighting

Draw a gingerbread person and give it a name. Get the young person to draw/write on the person all the physical things they notice about what happens when they are worried/anxious.

# Try using Phrases like:

**Using phrases that reassure a child they are physically and emotionally safe can be deeply reassuring.**

- I'm here.
- I've got you
- It's okay, you're safe
- I'm going to stay with you
- You're going to be okay
- It's okay to cry
- You're not in trouble

**Acknowledging and validating how a child feels without trying to explain or dismiss it can be very powerful.**

- That must be really hard
- I'm sorry that X is making you anxious
- Let's begin to unpick your worry
- Do you want to talk about it?
- You're worried, how can I help?
- It's not silly, if it's making you feel like this

**Autistic people often seek tangible answers, because they may lack executive functioning skills, the immediate need is not an emotional one, try and give a practical one, with solutions / choices or a backup plan.**



# Step 2: Limit reassurance

## Too much can lead to more anxiety!

No matter how much reassurance you give, an anxious child sometimes they want more. It only relieves your child's anxiety in the moment.

Does hearing “***Don't worry. Relax!***” help you when you're anxious about something? It probably doesn't comfort your child much, either. It's important to acknowledge that your child's fears are real.

You may like to.....

- Distract / redirect if you can
- See if they can produce the answer
- Let them know that others can feel that way to - Normalising
- Work together for a solution/plan/scaffold
- Present suggestions as a question rather than a statement – so they can say no, that is not what I am worried about
- Write it down: Social story, Comic strip Conversations/post it notes
- Check you have understood – reflect back
- Pick your timing – try and make it fun (if you can)



# Step 3: Encourage them...



Builds on self-esteem and confidence

Encourage them to become more independent, try not to do everything for them or feel you must fix it, walk alongside them. Show them what to do – let them know they have got this. Make sure they feel safe, and they do have autonomy

Break the task down with them, so they can achieve – what can you change to help make it work.

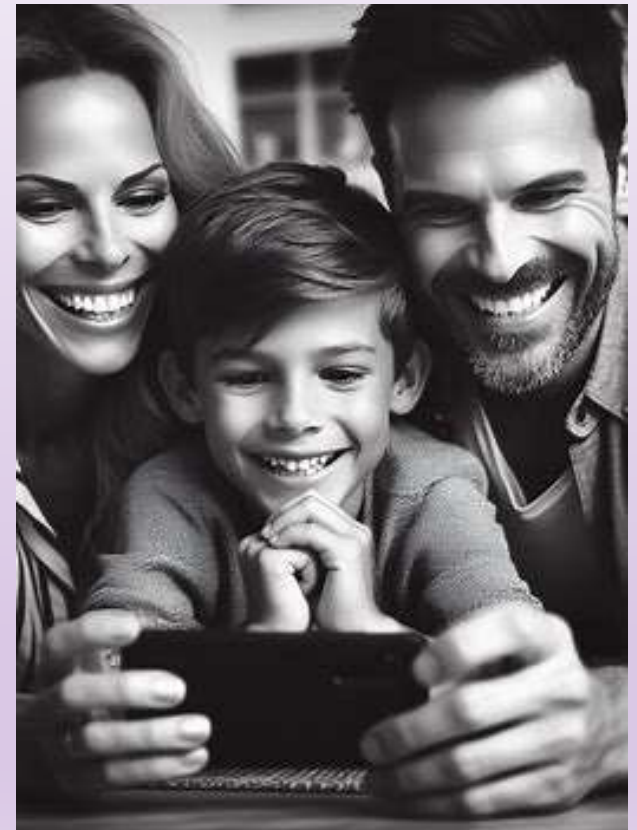
*“I feel this as well, its tricky, together we can do this”*

Believe in them, praise small attempts as well as big ones (make praise clear and specific). Celebrate success.

Give rewards, rewards can also offer further encouragement if you feel this will help.

# Step 3: Lead by example

- Using positive language – take out negative comments about them/ the situation, try not to feed the anxiety
- **Try and stay relaxed and connected with your child, what are they trying to communicate to you?**
- Beware of showing your own fears and anxieties
- Model being brave, show them, show them!
- **Don't expect children to know when to ask for help and don't expect them to know what they are thinking /worrying about**
- Make time to have fun and laugh together



# Discourage Avoidance

- A natural reaction to a threat is to get away from it. In the short term this is the best solution, however, by not facing your fears you never learn whether you can overcome it or was it really that bad!
- Try not to let them avoid too much, **encourage “Have a go” even for 5 minutes.** Break it down, scaffold the task. Do it together to start off with.
- Take teeny tiny steps, so that failure is very unlikely
- This will help build confidence and self esteem
- Remember ...It's ok to acknowledge the fear
- It's also ok for them to say “No” – and we try another day
- Remember how can we make them feel safe and have autonomy to lead to better independence



## Step 4: Step Ladder Approach – Reducing anxiety when facing a worry or fear

The step-ladder approach for the treatment of anxiety is medically known as graded or hierarchical exposure. (Step by Step) It's one of the 'behavioural' components of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and it's useful to know about when encouraging your child to address their fears.

This step-by-step approach allows your child to practice coping with their anxiety in manageable doses. In this way, your child also experiences successes along the way which builds up their confidence and sense of achievement.



# Example of Ladder

Going up stairs on my own...

I stay upstairs for 5 mins

I walk upstairs and into my room on my own

I walk up to the top of stairs on my own

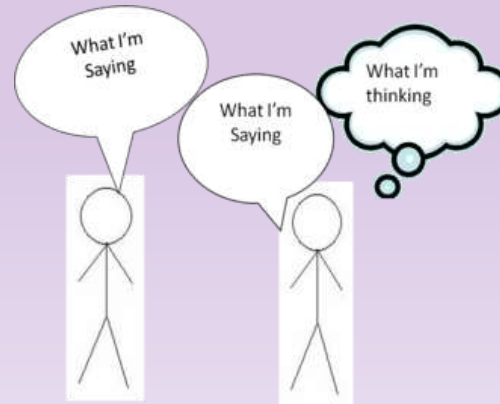
Mum stands at bottom of stairs I go to the top

Mum stands at bottom of stairs, I go up half way



# Step 5: Learn to Problem solve

- Help your child recognise anxiety – become detectives and look at possible solutions and how they can have ago
- Teach them about self-regulation skills....about emotions/ feelings / how their body feels
- Teach the autistic child what it means to be autistic
- Use the 5 point scale / Zones of regulation
- Comic Strip Conversations
- Social Stories
- Visuals
- Model bravery and role play







# Teach Relaxation techniques to help manage the physical symptoms of anxiety

- Having fun and laughter  
[www.actionforhappiness.org](http://www.actionforhappiness.org)
- Deep breathing techniques – Box / Belly
- 5 Things you can see, 4 Things you can hear, 3 Things you can touch, 2 Things you can smell, 1 deep cleansing breath.
- Mindfulness
- Encourage children to think of happy memories – show photos – make scrab books
- Exercise
- Listening to and playing music
- Spend time with friends and family
- Cuddle with pets and loved ones
- Doing these things together can help.



# Stage 5: what can I *do* about it?



Produce a list of ideas with your child – remember baby steps lead to bigger steps – what works, what doesn't work, what is important to them and what isn't

Make a **Self Soothe bags** and **Happy Boxes** can be a good here, and lists, or Velcro choice boards can work too. Calm spaces, breathing, relaxation exercises, **Make it visual**

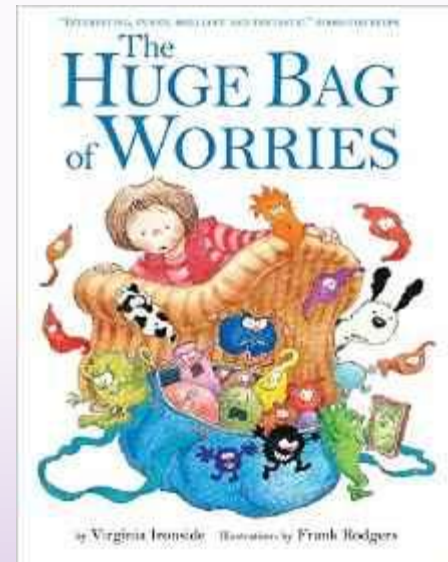
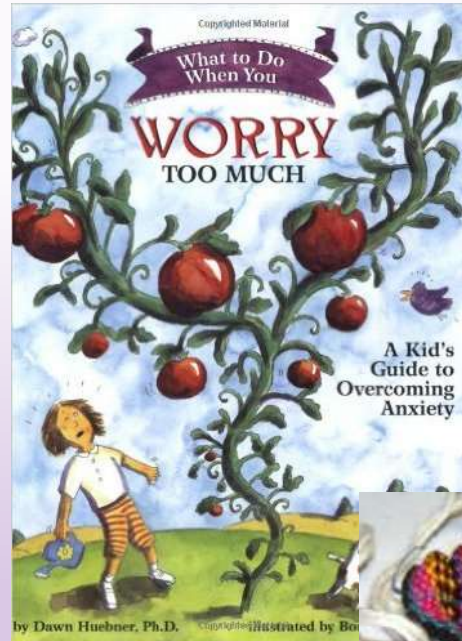
**The Aim:** Is for your child to know what helps them relax and bring them back down to a 2 or a 1



## Helping to keep them relaxed & safe:

- A Hug
- Chill out Zone
- Time alone – door signs – not in the mood leave me alone!
- Rating scales – Colours, Numbers,
- Physical Activities
- Talk things through
- Staying calm/relaxed yourself – do look after yourself
- Sensory snacks
- Controlled Breathing
- Deep Pressure
- Write or draw things down
- Listen to loud Music
- Put Together Visuals to help them remember

# Other resources



**FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING**

- CONNECT**  
TALK & LISTEN,  
BE THERE,  
FEEL CONNECTED
- Give**  
Your time,  
your words,  
your presence
- TAKE NOTICE**  
REMEMBER  
THE SIMPLE  
THINGS THAT  
GIVE YOU JOY
- KEEP LEARNING**  
EMBRACE NEW  
EXPERIENCES,  
SEE OPPORTUNITIES,  
SURPRISE YOURSELF
- BE ACTIVE**  
DO WHAT YOU CAN,  
ENJOY WHAT YOU DO,  
MOVE YOUR MOOD





# Just a few other links of support

**If you become concerned always contact your doctor or call 111 option 2 for professional help and guidance**



[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

The logo for Young Minds, with "YOUNG" in yellow and "MINDS" in black, both in a bold, sans-serif font. Below it, the tagline "fighting for young people's mental health" is written in a smaller, black, lowercase font.

**YOUNGMINDS**  
fighting for young people's mental health

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

The logo for Charlie Waller, featuring a blue speech bubble and an orange speech bubble overlapping each other. Below the speech bubbles, the name "Charlie Waller" is written in a blue, sans-serif font, with "Charlie" on the top line and "Waller" on the bottom line.

**Charlie  
Waller**

[www.charliewaller.org](http://www.charliewaller.org)



[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

# ASD Family Help

Thank you for listening  
Any questions?