

Anxiety, stress and autism (by a parent):

Some children are not good at recognising and describing their feelings. They need our help to interpret them. To do this we have to try to understand what is going on in their heads and why quite 'normal' situations may seem overwhelming to them and cause high levels of anxiety. Imagine you have a new job and have relocated to Japan. You've been learning the language for a while and you can get by, making yourself understood, but you don't get the more subtle nuances in what people say and you don't always know the right words to explain yourself to others. Now imagine you have to go to a party. You know it's important to your boss that you go and behave well. You haven't been able to work out what you should wear or if you are expected to do anything like make a speech. You don't know what the food will be like – some of the food in Japan seems very odd to you and you haven't eaten in this venue before so you don't know if they serve any western style food. You're not used to the culture in Japan yet so you are afraid you will cause offense in some way by your behaviour but you don't know how to avoid that. Would you feel anxious? If you went to the party and tried your absolute best to do all the right things how would you feel if your boss pulled you to one side and shouted at you for doing something wrong?

Be aware of your child's basic stress level – how full their bucket is at the moment. For example, children with anxiety or autism tend to get more tired towards the end of a school term and can't cope with as much then. They are like bottles of pop that have already been shaken a couple of times – one more shake might be a tiny thing by itself but enough to make the bottle explode because it was already fizzing. They live with a high baseline of anxiety just by living in a world that they may be struggling to understand or process.

We don't want our children to become too dependent on routines, they have to learn to adapt to changes sometimes. However, providing routine does lower their anxiety. If your child finds the school day very difficult it might help them to know exactly what they are having for tea – so having same menu for teas every week can help. Say Tuesdays have particular challenges (like PE lesson maybe), then that day can be the day they get their favourite tea. In the school holidays when their stress levels are generally lower you can change things around. Or it may be your child enjoys the routine of school and finds holidays more challenging in which case do the opposite! Provide routine when your child is struggling – the times to challenge it (when your child is coping better in general) will come around.

Look after yourself. If you can't stay calm then your child certainly won't. This is not a criticism – it's incredibly hard to stay calm in the face of a child having a meltdown (especially if you've already spent half your day taking phone calls from their school or completing endless forms). Being a parent can be very tiring! Try to make time to keep your own stress manageable. This is similar to when you are on a plane and the oxygen masks are released - you are told you must put your own on before you help your child to do it. Identify what techniques work for you. Is it coffee with a friend? Walking the dog? Phoning your mum? If you argue with or shout back at a child who is in a meltdown you will only (and always) inflame the situation. Your child is not processing what you say at that point anyway, so just say nothing, stay as nearby as it is safe to do and remain calm (or pretend you are). This shows your child that however overwhelming they are finding their emotions at that point, you are the adult and you are capable of absorbing them.

Practical Tips from parents:

- Never say 'Calm down'. When did that ever help? If you were furious and someone said that to you, how would you react?
- For children who can't bear having their hair brushed - get them to hold an electric toothbrush in their hands while you do it – the stronger vibrations distract the sensory attention
- As children become young adults if they still require help with showering/washing hair - ask them to wear a swimsuit while you help them, and then leave so they can finish washing alone
- Issue positive not negative instructions – say 'Leave the door open' rather than 'Don't slam the door' – it's much easier for them to process
- Always give a countdown to transitions that they won't like. If you need them to come off a video game, for example, or to leave the park. Tell them it is happening in 10 minutes, then 5 minutes, then 2 minutes, 1 minute. There may still be tantrums but they should be lessened. Some children prefer to have alarms go off on their phone rather than have you telling them.
- Some children react well to binary choices. 'Put this on' can cause a bad reaction, but 'Choose something to wear' can be overwhelming and cause anxiety. It may work better to say 'Do you want to wear this, or this? A similar strategy can help for food.
- Be watchful – you will know the expressions on your child's face that mean trouble is coming. It is much easier to divert from a meltdown at that point than later.
- If you find yourself thinking 'My child is giving me a really hard time today' try to change that thought to 'My child seems to be *having* a really hard time today. Is there anything we can do to change that?' Note – there isn't always anything you can do to change that, so don't beat yourself up about it.
- Even if you're not a 'group person' think about finding a support group either in reality or online. Maybe just go a couple of times so you have met one or two people. There's nothing as therapeutic as having a good rant about things to someone who won't judge you.
- Try to work out what your child's sensory needs are. Will a weighted blanket or compression clothing help them to relax? Are there certain rooms or halls with acoustics that cause alarm? Sound cancelling headphones or ear defenders can be very useful.
- When you have said something to your child allow more time than you think for them to respond. Difficulties with language processing can be a cause of misunderstandings. If they still don't seem to



have understood then say it again but don't change the words. If someone said something to you in French and you were trying to translate it in your head it wouldn't help if they kept trying different ways of saying the same thing before you have managed the translation of the first thing they said.

- Make sure they know where to sit – have a placemat that is theirs (a laminated A4 drawing they have done maybe). This can be placed on any table in any setting so they know where they should be. Have a mat that is theirs at school so they know where to sit in assembly or in the classroom.
- Reward systems can cause huge anxiety in some children. Try to use them in a way that doesn't depend on success so they don't fear losing the reward. E.g. on school photograph day tell them you know it can be a tricky day so as a reward at the end of the day they can have a chocolate bar (or whatever). Avoid saying that **if** they sit nicely and smile **then** they can have a chocolate bar - otherwise if they find the experience overwhelming and refuse to sit or smile then an hour later when the photographer leaves they could have a meltdown over the chocolate bar they have lost. With the lower stress going into the day knowing there is a treat at the end they are more likely to cope with the photographer and sit and smile anyway. Or have a reward that happens after a set number of positive behaviours (however long that takes – don't choose a reward that is time sensitive).
- Choose your battles. It's so easy to get caught up in things that don't matter or don't need to matter. Will it really ruin your sister's wedding if your son wears trainers or plays quietly with a toy car in the church? Sort things mentally into three categories – 1)non-negotiable, like things that effect health and safety, 2)important but with room for compromise and 3)not so important that it's worth causing a fight. Category 1 needs to be the smallest and 3 needs to be the largest or you will find yourself in constant battles without the energy to win the important ones.

