**Feature of Effective Practice and Support for Autistic People experiencing EBSA**

Anxiety and fear can be very dominant emotions for autistic people. Many of the challenges that autistic people encounter arise within the rules, parameters and constraints of a neuro-typically dominant social world. School systems generally reflect this dominance, resulting in higher risk for neuro-atypical people to experience higher levels of stress. For some autistic people, this would have been underlined by lockdown during the pandemic, where these daily stressors were suddenly removed. We know that some children, young people and families have found some aspects of the return to full time education difficult. However for others, the structure, routine, predictability, engagement, and separation of home and school contexts, as well as reconnection with key adults and peers, has been very welcome. It really depends on the individual and their experience.

Some autistic people will benefit from strong visual and perceptual reasoning skills, and enjoy learning and activities that involve pictures, patterns and logic. However you may find that their spoken language develops slowly or incompletely, that they are less likely to understand creative or idiomatic language, and that their verbal reasoning skills are not as strong as most others for their age and stage. They may also have differences in how they process auditory information, so spoken words and their meaning might disappear quite quickly, or they may not follow that instructions apply to them as individuals. They may also have a limited emotional vocabulary. This type of profile is perhaps more familiar as it is aligned to a historically narrower understanding of an autistic profile.

Some autistic people will present quite differently to this, for example, they may have very strong verbal reasoning skills, an interest in vocabulary and the written word, be immersed in the world of emotional literacy, highly attuned to their internal thoughts and feelings, but perhaps require processing time and time out from linguistic, cognitive and social activities. Some autistic people experience delayed effects in response to an act or experience, with their reaction coming hours or days later. Some need more time to identify their internal emotions.

Practitioners can reduce anxiety by creating more consistency and through a range of approaches that make the school experience more predictable:

* *Keep things visual:* Either pictorial, written down or using videos, depending on the individual. Visual prompts are always helpful to gain and direct attention, to support comprehension and enhance learning experiences. Make visual cue cards available for support around daily social communication if required.
* *Enhance the structure:* Weekly timetables, daily schedules and learning activities broken down into shorter, more manageable steps will often help. Stick to clear timescales, start and finish activities on time, and give children and young people a chance to complete work that isn’t managed at another time so that they can experience closure and not worry about loose ends.
* *Break the problems down:* Explore the use of social stories for specific experiences that they find challenging. Consider a time-out strategy, and a plan for where to go that is safe and appropriate, if things are getting tough for any reason.
* *Time to process:* Begin by using the child or young person’s name before you speak to them. Allow time for them to process new information, up to 10 seconds for a response before checking that they have heard and understood the question / expectation / instruction. Ask them to repeat back in their own words if they can.
* *Make it easier:* Keep language simple, concise and consistent to avoid overload, and supplement with visuals where possible. Break the tasks down into more manageable steps
* *Teach them how:* Teach them social interaction and conversational rules, for example when to start, when it’s ok to interrupt, what turn taking looks like, remaining on topic, follow up questions, personal space, facial expressions and non-verbal communication, when and how to end politely. Teach appropriate voice volume and tone awareness for different contexts. Model appropriate social use of language e.g. sentence openers and responses to familiar types of questions. Encourage them to ask what others mean by any phrases or use of words that seem atypical. This will help to develop their social confidence and ability to develop peer relationships.
* *Support change:* Enhance support for transitions where necessary e.g. with the support of an adult, meeting and greeting, alternative transition times such as just before the bell, supports to manage the sensory overload (e.g. headphones). Prepare and equip them to manage change in advance: when will it happen, what should they expect, what is expected of them, how long it will last, and what will happen after? What can they do to help manage the change? Give them time to process that change is coming, e.g. “in five minutes the bell will go…” and provide clearly defined breaks between structured activities, and choices to manage unstructured times.
* *Tell them why:* Explain the reasons behind decisions and changes that affect them. Teach the school values, rules and boundaries explicitly, and explore the logic behind them (this rule is in place because…respect is a core school value because…). Explicitly teach and remind them that when their teacher is addressing the class, it is likely that they are also speaking to them too, so attending and listening is important.
* *Question the school’s own norms:* Sometimes things are done a certain way because they always have been and nobody has really questioned why. If the school bell is too loud – can it be turned down, turned off or changed? Does it really need to go at all in some instances? The answer might be yes, but question whether norms can be changed to really benefit autistic learners, especially where they will not make much difference to anyone else. Maybe the PTA can help run a Silent Disco for a change or to celebrate Autism Awareness Week?
* *Special interests:* Capitalise on their interests and strengths and tap into the subjects that they are passionate about, then tailor their curricular experiences around these. You can also make the links between your subject area and theirs explicit.
* *Make them feel useful and capable:* “I’d find it so helpful if you could…” Give them the chance to showcase their strengths, talents and interests.
* *Have restorative discussions*: Especially when things haven’t worked out, and use visuals to support questioning (e.g. What happened? Who was affected? How did it make you feel? What needs to happen now?) and visual prompts for responses (e.g. “it was too loud…”, “I felt angry…”
* *Make sure you’re clear:* Consider how your language and phrasing could have been misinterpreted and check that you have been understood as you intended to be. Be as accurate and concrete as you can. Teach them the meaning of unusual phrases and encourage them to ask for clarification when people use language they don’t understand e.g. “They are off to play football in the bus” doesn’t mean they are playing football inside the bus. People are very often loose and inaccurate with the language they use and rely on people getting the ‘jist’ of what they mean – often relying heavily on context or prior discussion / knowledge. This is often fundamental to communication errors between autistic and non-autistic people.
* *Highlight your own mistakes and recovery:* Model how to cope with the frustration, and talk through how to recover. You can achieve this by pretending you don’t know something, or getting something wrong; perhaps asking them for help or to show you how to do a certain task that you want them to do.
* *Selected choices:* These give them the feeling of being in some control, which can reduce feelings of anxiety (e.g. “Do you want to start the phased return during period one or period two?”
* *Flexible expectations:* Choose your battles: is your aim and need worth risking a breakdown in your relationship or an emotionally distressing experience for the young person? This is not the same as letting them do what they like. Boundaries are clearly important, but where possible avoid them becoming power battles. E.g. “Because I’m telling you… because I said so”
* *Backward learning:* If they are stuck, refusing or struggling, try backward learning – you or someone else helps them with 90% of the task, they finish the last 10% so experience closure (and build from there).
* *Indirect praise:* For example talk to a pupil or member of staff about something good the child has done while they are in earshot – may be more easily accepted than directly praising them.
* *Slowly forward*: A de-sensitisation or gradual exposure plan (e.g. building on short amounts of time in non-preferred situations (e.g. classes, subjects, areas of the building, transition points, with particular peers or staff) rewarding and recognising very small steps and appropriate use of contingency / safety plans.
* *Make it logical:* If the young person relates to it, use probability, maths, likelihood and logic wherever possible. Numbers are consistent, language and people are often not.
* *Explicitly teach for each context*: Emotional regulation, and desirable social behaviours often need to be taught directly and specifically around all potentially triggering situations. Some children and young people will not be able to flexibly transfer their coping strategies across different situations. This can sometimes be seen unhelpfully by others as evidence that they are ‘picking and choosing’ or ‘manipulating’ situations to their own end. Teach the behaviours and language you want to see, rather than focussing on the behaviour or language you want them to stop using.
* *Depersonalise the situation*: Use rules to your advantage, e.g. “I have a dress code for work, because those are the rules of the system.”