Supporting EBSA and Autism   By Dr. Mollie Higgins

Students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) are more likely to experience Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), compared to their peers (Department for Education, 2021). In addition to the general risk factors for EBSA, autistic young people experience a number of differences which further increase their feelings of anxiety in the school environment.

- Differences in identifying and describing their own and others' emotions
- Emotional regulation difficulties
- Differences in sensory processing and finding the sensory environment overwhelming e.g. loud corridors, different smells, busy classrooms
- Difficulties understanding and predicting social situations and managing interactions with others
- Worries around change or transitions e.g. moving between classrooms, changes to timetables, supply teachers
- Executive functioning and organisation difficulties – remembering books, homework, equipment
- Masking - try to 'fit in' or attempting to appear more neurotypical by changing their behaviour and internalising any anxiety
- Experiencing performance anxiety related to the schoolwork or exams
- Rigid or inflexible thinking about school

These challenges mean that some autistic students try and manage their anxiety by avoiding school altogether. When we avoid something, our anxiety immediately reduces, but it makes it more difficult to attend school in the future. An important way of supporting attendance is speaking with students directly to hear their views and opinions about what might reduce their anxiety and help them attend school.

Ten autistic secondary-age students were asked to describe the best type of school and the worst type of school. This technique is known as The Ideal School and is based on Personal Construct Psychology. Five key themes were identified and the key points are summarised below:

1. There is limited choice

Students described a lack of choice over decisions at school and felt decisions were always made by adults. There was a sense that nothing could change about school as students perceived themselves as having limited autonomy. Despite this, participants hoped for increased choice over their school experiences and described an ideal school where they were involved in the decision-making. Opportunities for increased autonomy including freedom to take a break from a lesson, as well as choice over their preferred style of lesson and which peers they work with.

2. Relationships are key

Relationships with staff and other students had a significant impact on school experiences. Students wanted support from adults who were understanding and listened to their views, as well as opportunities to engage with like-minded peers who were keen to learn. Key to developing understanding and trusting relationships was the importance of staff learning more about autism.

3. The need for a comfortable school environment

Students hoped for a physical school environment that supported their sensory and emotional needs. They preferred a school environment that was not sensorily overwhelming, had unlimited access to separate spaces, newer resources and facilities and opportunities to spend more time in nature and with animals.

4. Seeking adjustments for individual needs

Students described specific adaptations that would help meet their needs in school, including increased flexibility, reduced pressure and expectations and an adapted and personalised teaching and learning environment. This included teachers reconsidering the value of homework and adjusting expectations based on individual needs.

5. A hope for change

All students wanted to attend school! This suggests that autistic students experiencing EBSA are often motivated to learn and attend, but they were clear that they needed a school that understood them and was able to meet their needs.
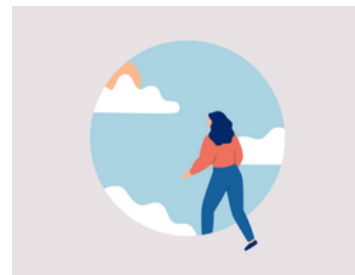
How can schools help?

The following ideas for adjustments were suggested by autistic young people. Which adjustments has your school already implemented? Which other adjustments could you make within your school?

Autonomy and student voice:

- Actively listen to students' views, opinions and ideas
- Involve students in decisions that affect them e.g. the school uniform policy, style of lessons, individual vs group work, how school is decorated, the lunch menu, the subjects they take.
- Allow students some autonomy over their day e.g. use of an exit card or time in a separate space when students identify a need.
- Encourage an environment where students can speak freely and feel comfortable asking for help by promoting open discussions and responding to their ideas without judgment.
- Aim to reduce power imbalances between students and staff by valuing students' input and ideas.
- Aim for fair and reasonable rules that take into consideration the views and needs of all students.

Adjustments to meet individual needs:

- Consider the purpose and amount of homework set for students.
- Create opportunities for breaks throughout the day including use of a separate calm room.
- Consider sending work home if a students is absent, without expectation for completion.
- Consider the appropriateness of detentions and other consequences on a case-by-case basis.
- Embed more creative, engaging, interactive lessons that actively involve students in their learning.
- Ensure key information is clearly explained using visuals.
- Check whether students have understood the task.

The school environment:

- Consider the sensory needs of students including reducing the noise level, allowing use of a separate space and allowing students to leave lessons earlier to access quieter corridors.
- Create opportunities for background music and adjustable lighting.
- Consider adaptations to the school uniform to meet sensory needs.
- Create separate calm rooms away from the classroom that are designed and decorated collaboratively with students.
- Consider increased access to green space e.g. lessons outside.
- Consider whether there are opportunities for students to have access to animals at school.
- Aim to create a bright, welcoming environment with students' work on display.
- Where possible, provide access to facilities such as libraries, science laboratories and sporting activities.

Strong relationships:

- Prioritise a relational approach across the school.
- Ensure staff understand the value of positive relationships with students.
- Avoid shouting, raised voices, using sarcasm or publicly questioning absence in front of students.
- Ensure staff treat all students with respect and understanding.
- Create opportunities for students to spend time with peers e.g. at break and lunch time and in group work and discussions.
- Ensure lessons are tailored to students' interests where possible, to increase motivation and their ability to support one another with learning.
- Facilitate conversations relating to difference to encourage tolerance and acceptance amongst students.
- Ensure clear and reasonable boundaries are maintained by staff.
- Avoid stereotyping, labelling or grouping autistic students together.
- Seek opportunities for staff to engage with training relating to SEN and ASC.

For further support with gathering pupil voice, making suitable person-centred adaptations, or individual support plans for increasing pupil attendance, please contact your link EP