

Seven Insights for Reducing Anxiety in Children with Asperger's

By Nancy Swanberg, MS, LMHC, Executive director of The Friendship Network for Children, Inc.

Anxiety in children with Asperger's can easily go undetected and untreated. All too often the signs are hard to see, or they are misinterpreted. We all know that someone with Asperger's processes social information in a way considered different from the norm, but have you considered how this neurological difference relates to feelings and emotions?

Emotional understanding is a key component to successful social relationships. Just think about your closest relationships and how you resolve personal conflicts. The simple (and sometimes not so simple) act of getting along with others is deeply entwined with emotions, so it only makes sense that children with Asperger's are highly vulnerable in this area. Unfortunately, this leaves them at risk for anxiety and depression.

The following insights will help you see things from the child's perspective. Whether a child is having a hard time coping with stress or has a diagnosed anxiety or depression disorder, they will benefit when those around them truly understand their world. Honestly, the more people who "get it", the less stressful the world will be for children with Asperger's.

Insight #1: Children with Asperger's desperately want to connect with others

More people each day are realizing that children with Asperger's long to connect with others, even when outer appearances indicate otherwise. I would take this one step further: children with Asperger's *need* to connect. I may not be certain about much in this world, but I know that everyone needs to give and receive love.

I've had the privilege to help many isolated children connect with others for the very first time. In each case I look to see: What took so long? What held them back? Usually the answer is fear. Perhaps a child had a bad experience in their first play date, say, at age five. That child comes to me at age ten having never made a friend. Some parents may say, "Oh, he's happier just playing video games." Others have tried time and again to hold successful play dates, and it just hasn't worked. In reality, the child is simply unable to cross the gulf on their own.

When you've finished reading this article, you'll have an idea of just how wide that gulf is, and what you can do to bridge the gap. Begin by recognizing that children with Asperger's "choose" isolation only because, without our help, they have no other option.

Insight #2: There are continuous misunderstandings

Recently, a school behavior specialist said this to me regarding children on the autism spectrum: "The more language a student has, the more opportunity for misunderstandings and confusion." Sounds ironic, but in my own practice I have found this to be all too true. Sadly, the irony easily misleads parents and professionals alike, producing an even

more confused child on a downward spiral toward anxiety and depression. The number of misunderstandings throughout the day cannot be underestimated.

What can you do? In any situation, assume there is an element of confusion until proven otherwise. Yes, this is the opposite of the “innocent until proven guilty” principle, but for children on the Autism spectrum confusion is always present, robbing them of happiness. This is true whether you see it or not, so you must be on constant alert for it. And make no mistake: the misunderstandings go both ways. Adults often fail to see the child’s point of view.

Get to know the child’s world. The more you see things through their eyes, the more you can expose this ever-present thief and break the downward spiral.

Insight #3: You can’t always tell by looking

A boy I was seeing in individual therapy had an unusual way of showing that he was nervous: A smile was his typical response to anxiety and confusing situations. His true feelings were not readily apparent. School personnel said to me, “He’s fine, don’t worry about it.” Then at school one day, with a smile on his face, the boy deliberately hit his head against the wall.

Professionals blamed the family and openly stated the parents must be abusive. In truth, school was simply too stressful, and the boy was doing everything he could to keep it together for as long as possible. This is a very serious situation. Being under this amount of stress on a daily basis is unacceptable. It can lead to serious mental health issues, including significant anxiety and depression. It is not okay to let it continue.

Don’t depend on typical signs of emotions. You can’t always tell by looking at someone with Asperger’s how they are feeling.

Insight #4: You can’t always tell by asking

Here is another story, not unlike the last one. (Are you seeing a pattern here?)

A middle school student with Asperger’s invited everyone in her English class to her birthday party, but not one of them responded to her invitation. A sensitive teacher approached the student, who agreed to speak with the school psychologist. After telling the psychologist she was not upset, the girl left the office, took a pair of scissors from the secretary’s desk, and stabbed herself in the hand.

She ended up as a client of mine.

Although she was academically exceptional, the student did not know what words like *sad*, *nervous* and *upset* meant. Oh, she knew the dictionary definitions. She simply didn’t relate them to feelings within herself.

Strong verbal ability is not the same as emotional awareness. Children with Asperger's tend to think in literal, concrete terms. Yet feelings are extremely abstract. Without the right tools, miscommunication is inevitable.

Fortunately, there is a way to use concrete language to identify feelings: associate something concrete with an emotion. For example, if a family once had a fun trip to Disneyland, you might ask, "Are you Disneyland happy?" Of course if Disneyland was over-stimulating and stressful, you could use it as an expression for *that* feeling.

The student and I did a great deal of work along these lines, in effect creating a personal dictionary of concrete terms, a sort of shorthand for feelings. "Do you feel disappointed like the time your video game broke?" became simply *Do you feel broken-game?* Such shorthand phrases are always based on past events where the child's emotions have been accurately identified. *New puppy excited, thunderstorm scared* – you get the idea.

This student has come a long way. She has changed schools and now has a group of authentic friends.

Insight #5: Intelligence and social awareness are not the same

Parents of newly diagnosed children with Asperger's have often said to me, "But he's so smart, how can he *not* get things?" It somehow seems obvious to them that social skills automatically come with a high IQ. The two are not correlated, and if you assume they are it will lead to complications.

You tread on dangerous ground when you wrongly identify the motivation behind a child's behavior. Adults will claim, "He should know better," or, "He's just doing that for attention." And in fifty other cases they might be right. But a child with Asperger's is wired differently. How sad is it when a child is disciplined because an adult misunderstood? How much worse when that misunderstanding is due to the adult's ignorance of the child's neurological disorder? These situations are incredibly harmful. Frankly, I've found that some teachers are slow to catch on to this, forcing families to prove the extent of their child's deficits to the school system, an awkward position for a parent if ever there was one.

On the plus side, you can raise a child's social awareness using metaphors from topics that interest them. For example, you might explain feelings of liking and disliking others in terms of magnets that attract or repel. A child with knowledge of animals may relate to stories of animals that work together socially, versus those who hunt alone. Don't be afraid to state the obvious. In some cases the gap between intelligence and social awareness is quite wide, but it can be bridged once you account for it.

Insight #6: Idioms are confusing

I recently skimmed through a book which described over 3,200 idioms in the English language, and this was just a partial list. "I'm itching to leave." "Cut it out." "I'd give my right arm...." We take idioms like these for granted. Even on hearing such an expression for the first time, you can usually catch its meaning based on the context. But imagine

you lacked this ability. If you've learned a foreign language – or tried to explain English idioms to a non-native speaker – you'll have some idea of the difficulties faced by children with Asperger's.

Be careful with idioms. Many children with Asperger's can become extraordinarily frustrated with them, and have difficulty tolerating them emotionally. Even a simple phrase like "take a seat," when interpreted literally, can lead to embarrassment. How would you feel if you risked such a misunderstanding in practically every interaction of your life? It's not hard to understand why a child would withdraw from social interactions.

How can you help? Simplify language. Explain idioms when you use them, and avoid them in stressful situations. Some children I see have developed a good sense of idioms, but when in new situations, the meanings evade them. It's wise to completely avoid idioms when talking to someone who is under stress.

You might be surprised how often you use idioms without being aware of it. Learning to spot them can be a fun family game. Turn on the TV and start counting, or observe two family members having a conversation. This can be quite enjoyable as you try to picture what phrases like *it's raining cats and dogs* would really look like. Bring in the laughter, but be careful not to laugh *at* someone when an idiom is misunderstood, because this can be extremely humiliating. Provide a safe and fun environment to allow the child to learn that yes, language can indeed be confusing.

Insight #7: The physical environment is disorienting

Children with Asperger's don't know what to attend to or how to prioritize what they observe in their environment. It's another source of stress in daily life, as the following story illustrates.

A mother sent her son into the fish market to pick up some fish she had ordered. He had done this with his mother on dozens of occasions, but this was the first time he went in alone. After ten minutes, he returned to the car empty-handed and explained that the store had been rebuilt. Naturally Mom went in to investigate. She found the place as it had always been, but very crowded, with people standing in front of the ticket dispenser, blocking it from view. Her son thought the store had been rebuilt because he did not see the familiar dispenser, and his mother could not convince him otherwise.

This type of experience leads to loss of confidence. The world appears to be a crazy and unstable place, disorienting and overwhelming. If situations like this are not handled sensitively, the child will be at risk for more serious emotional difficulties.

I'll repeat my earlier advice: Get to know the child's world. It's easier to understand their anxieties and unusual behaviors when you realize how differently they perceive the environment.

Conclusion

Today, there is so much written about helping children with Asperger's that it's difficult to know where to begin. In my opinion, it is important to implement just one new concept at a time, and then add more as you are comfortable. Above all, a child needs to feel safe and understood in order to thrive.

Therapeutic socialization groups – groups run by licensed mental health professionals – can do a great deal to help. Effective socialization groups require the guidance of group leaders who have grasped the insights presented here, who know the difference between intellect and social awareness, and have the training to help children with Asperger's navigate the tricky emotional landscapes. When you reduce their anxiety and help them to be happy, everything else begins to fall into place.

I've worked with children on the Autism spectrum for over twenty years, and have a tremendous appreciation for how their minds work. If at times it seems like a mystery, it's a mystery that can be solved. The more you see life from the child's eyes, the more support you can offer. Every heartfelt connection, no matter how small, can significantly improve the quality of life for the children we serve.

The Friendship Network for Children in Northborough, MA provides over 25 weekly socialization groups for children ages 3-17 on the Autism spectrum. Groups use the Social Accessibility Therapy™ model developed by Nancy Swanberg, MS, LMHC. In this model, clinicians see life from the child's perspective, building an "access ramp" to friendships and an improved quality of life. For more information on The Friendship Network's services, visit their website at: www.networkforchildren.org.