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# Supporting Children & Young People Autism and Anxiety

Information and advice for  
schools and settings



Advice to support Autistic CYP or those with  
Communication & Interaction Difficulties

**Advisory Teaching Service**

Communication and Interaction Team



## Understanding differences and Anxiety

This guidance applies to those with a diagnosis and those identified with possible social communication and interaction differences.

The Autism Education Trust (AET) approach is based on Autism as a difference and not a deficit, a different way of thinking.

The AET model explains that Autistic people will experience differences in three key areas:

- Social Understanding and Communication
- Flexible Thinking, Information Processing and Understanding
- Sensory Processing and Integration

Each autistic person will have their own unique profile within the key areas of difference. The key areas of difference influence the way autistic pupils learn and experience their educational settings.

As a result of the three key area of difference, autistic pupils may well feel increased and intense periods of anxiety within their daily lives.

The AET recognises that anxiety that is associated with Autism, will usually be associated with one or parts of:

- Separation
- Uncertainty
- Sensory arousal
- Performance

Stress and worry can often increase throughout the course of a school day, with intense emotions being released at peak times of anxiety.

## Signposting

### **The Autism Education Trust:**

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/>

**National Autistic Society:** <https://www.autism.org.uk/>

**Gloucestershire Healthy Living and Learning (GHLL):** This includes information about how your school could gain the 'Mental Health Champion's award'. [ghll.org.uk/mental-health/](http://ghll.org.uk/mental-health/)

### **Anna Freud National Centre for children and families:**

<https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/resources/7-ways-to-support-children-and-young-people-who-are-worried>

### **Charlie Waller Trust, mental health charity:**

<https://charliewaller.org>

**Search engine, youtube:** Dr Tony Lloyd, Understanding and managing your child's anxiety presentation (from ADHD Foundation)

**Book:** The Incredible 5-Point Scale: assisting students in understanding social interactions and controlling their emotional responses by Kari Dunn Buron & Mitzi Curtis.

- The Communication & Interaction Team offer AET 'Autism and Anxiety' training (cost involved) for school-based staff. For further details contact your school's allocated Advisory Teacher or <https://www.businesssupportservices.org>
- For advice relating to CYP already known to the Advisory Teaching Service, please contact your school's allocated Advisory Teacher for further advice and support.
- For advice and support for CYP who are not known to the Advisory Teaching Service, you may wish to contact us via the ATS Advice Line for no-names advice and additional support. Details can be found on the ATS website: <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/schoolsnet/your-pupils/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-send/send->

## What school can do to help

**Actively promote an 'Autism-friendly' environment:** attend the AET training that ATS delivers, complete regular sensory audits to identify good practice and areas that could be adjusted. Develop peer awareness of Autism, join in with National Autism Awareness Day.

**Communicate with parents and carers:** develop a close and supportive relationship, which promotes partnership. Share information about the CYP so key adults have a good knowledge of the individual.

**Make a plan:** use of the assess, plan, do, review cycle to monitor changes, and involve the CYP to ensure a shared approach. When making a plan, consider the views of the CYP and ensure these are central to the plan.

**Support staff wellbeing:** supporting a CYP with their anxiety can be exhausting. Adults need to know that they have an exit plan and can switch with another adult if they need to. Sometimes a change of face for the CYP can help.



After a particular scenario the adult may want to take a breather and regulate themselves too, grab a cuppa! An opportunity to talk / evaluate the scenario may be required. This is very important.

## Recognising behaviour and triggers

It is important for adults supporting autistic pupils to identify the behaviour / actions they see when a CYP begins to become distressed but also to begin to identify possible triggers that may cause the observable actions / behaviour.

### The Iceberg Model

This can be a useful tool for adults to use when recording observed behaviour, then to think about the underlying causes of it. Once causes / triggers are identified reasonable adjustments can be made to lessen the frequency and intensity of the anxiety building again in a similar situation.



What you see: the actions/behaviour itself.

What you don't see: why the actions/behaviour might be happening.

Adults will need to be 'detectives' and look through their 'Autism lense' to evaluate why the behaviour may have happened, and relate this to the 4 types of anxiety associated with Autism.

Examples could be;

- Separation: from parents/carers on arrival to school/familiar main 'Go-to' person in school is absent etc.
- Uncertainty: change of routine without prior warning / not knowing what to do in a certain situation etc.
- Sensory arousal: 'feeling of crush' in a busy space, the noise in the classroom being too loud etc.
- Performance: refusal to engage with learning tasks, making a mistake in their work, struggling to keep pace in their work etc.

## A healthy stress-regulation system

A healthy stress-regulation system is what enables us to respond flexibly to the challenges in our day. It includes:

- Physiological regulation; the body's ability to calm quickly after a potential threat has passed.
- Relational regulation: the ability to signal distress and reach out to others to help and soothe us.
- Cognitive regulation: the ability to recognise internal feelings / sensations and interpret the immediate environment, to assess the appropriateness of emotional response.

By understanding the brain and body's reaction to perceived stressors we can begin to make the connection to what we may see when CYP are becoming increasingly distressed..

*Going back to our AET key areas of difference, we understand that Autistic people can find adapting to things flexibly and communicating their emotions very difficult. This helps us to realise why autistic CYP in school may have raised levels of anxiety in response to their immediate context.*

## On-going ideas for supporting the CYP

The ideas below could be used as on-going supportive strategies to the CYP—used during the times they are calm and able to engage in their learning. These can form the foundation of the anxiety curve model, and in time, will help the CYP have the skill and 'tools' to manage their anxiety more independently

**Drawing:** ask the CYP to draw or write their thoughts and feelings about school.

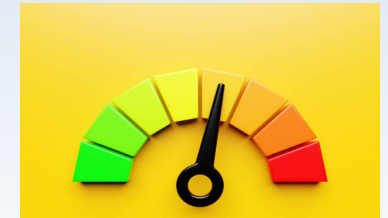
**Solution-focused approaches:** ask the CYP to build their 'ideal classroom', or drawing can provide information about what the CYP would like to be different, rather than focusing on difficulties.

**Card sorts:** risk and resilience cards can help inform adults what the CYP's difficulties are, as well as supportive factors that are already in place. This process can enable the CYP to communicate non-verbally.

**Feeling cards:** these can support CYPs to identify the different feelings that they experience in different contexts. This can promote more effective communication.

**Emotional coaching:** attune, validate and empathise with the emotions that CYP experience. Help the CYP find words to label the emotions they re experiences. Listen empathetically and validate the child's feelings.

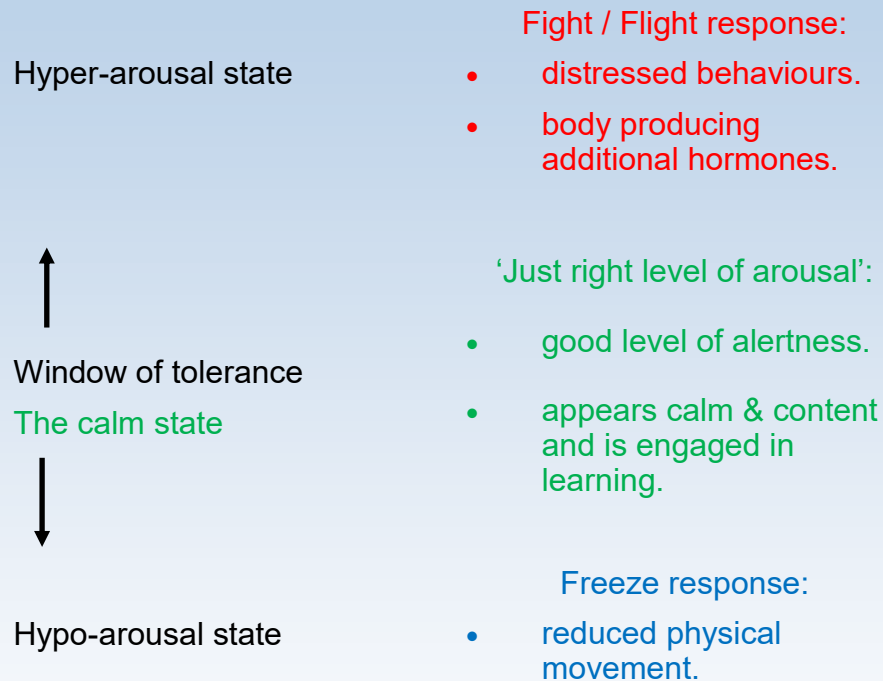
**Scaling:** consider using resources such as a feeling thermometer or scale to consider aspects within the school day that may be stressors i.e. aspects of the physical environment, times of day, particular lessons or activities, social interactions etc.



**Gradual exposure and building toleration:** short, planned activities, in a safe secure environment that will gently 'nudge' the CYP's involvement in situations they find stressful. Use of resources that will help them develop their window of tolerance e.g wearing ear protectors for a minute in a loud classroom.

## Window of tolerance

'A large window of tolerance' describes people who are able to regulate themselves physiologically. This means they are able to tolerate changing levels of arousal without becoming distressed or dysregulated - they will not respond by the Fight / Flight Freeze responses often.



CYP need to be in the calm state for optimum learning.

## The Fight / Flight / Freeze Responses

### The Fight / Flight Responses

The Fight / Flight response is found in all mammals. When we are faced with an immediate challenge or perceived threat our nervous system will step in to help us navigate the way through.



The amygdala is found in the brain and acts as our personal alarm system. When our senses trigger this, it sends a distress signal to an area called the hypothalamus.



The hypothalamus activates the sympathetic nervous system and stress chemicals are released: adrenaline and noradrenaline. This induces high physical arousal to enable us to fight / flight. This maybe when we feel our heart beat faster, our palms become sweaty etc



If the brain perceives the threat is not going away then the hypothalamus reacts again, releasing more hormone to the adrenal glands which produce Cortisol.



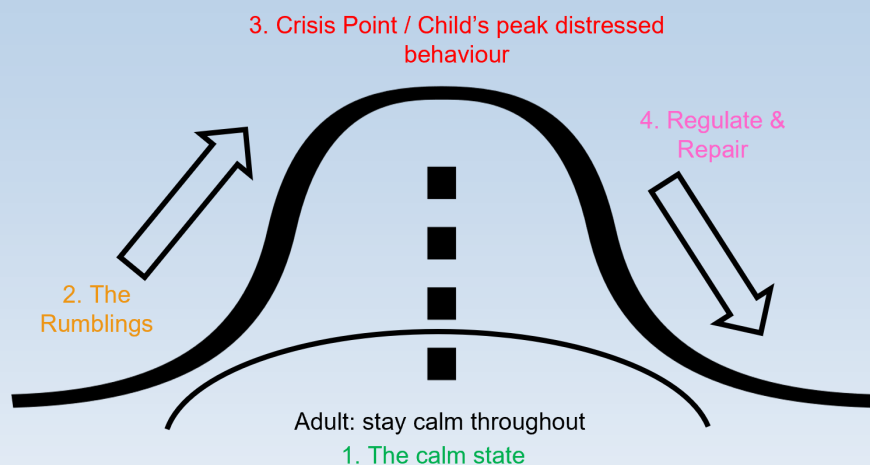
Only when the perceived threat has reduced will the body begin to relax and settle back to a calm state. It can take some time for the Cortisol to be removed from the bloodstream.

### The Freeze Response.

The Freeze response is reportedly more common in younger children, and interestingly more common in girls than boys. It numbs emotions and reduces physical movement.

## Charting a CYPs Anxiety Scale

Devising an anxiety scale to mirror the pupil's increasing anxiety and adult's management of it will help form a template to refer to. This could work alongside the child's One Page Profile and Risk Assessment (if they require one).



Key:

**1. The calm state:** the CYP is calm, appears content and is engaged in learning.

**2. The Rumbblings:** through good knowledge of the CYP, this is where staff begin to notice gradual early stress indicators, through to additional signs of increased distressed behaviour/action. Possibly raised voice, hands over ears, running.

**3. Crisis point / CYPs peak distressed behaviour:** possibly shouting, crying, throwing / swiping resources etc.

**4. Regulate and Repair:** the CYP begins to lessen the frequency of the distressed behaviours but may still be upset. The CYP may indicate they'd like your support but might still be resistant to 'move on'. Possibly looking to you and moving closer to seek assurance.

## Supporting a CYP during increasing anxiety

**1. The calm state:** adults teach the daily on-going strategies to develop emotional regulation through physiological, relational and cognitive strategies - implicitly teaching links between emotion, sensation and action. Strategies could be: visuals, routine, social narratives, comic strip stories, emotional barometer, calming techniques etc.

**2. Attunement:** adult needs to be able to recognise and react to escalated indicators of increased anxiety in the CYP.

**3. Validation:** adult needs to validate the CYP's experience and offer some emotional recognition e.g 'Corr, that was a loud noise, it surprised me'.

**4. Refocus:** adult needs to attempt to re-focus the CYP's attention elsewhere, if this doesn't work then assess, its it time to leave the situation? Would a change of adult help?

**5. Lower social demands:** such as talking, smiles and offering choices.

**6. Safety:** make the environment safe or all, give the CYP space.

**7. Co-regulator:** adult needs to begin to soothe and calm the CYP until they can regulate themselves. Show appropriate compassion and respect towards the CYP. Model calming strategies e.g breathing, rocking, holding hands, humming or singing.

**8. Assess and address:** is the child hot/cold, thirsty/hungry, tired etc? Offer resources and time to have their physical needs met.

**9. Listen—Link—Learn:** when calm again, actively seek the CYP's voice/views about the incident. Some CYP will open up about their feelings whilst engaging in other activities, such as colouring / painting /cookery. Others may need the help of a 'draw and talk' approach. Can the CYP identify what caused it?, how did it make them feel? Help the child to link the feelings they had to the actions they made, build on the strategies you have already put in place to develop the emotional sensation awareness. What can the CYP and you do the same and differently next time a similar situation arises? How can you help the CYP learn to generalise what has happened to other possible anxiety-building situation, to allow them to manage their emotions better?