

Different behaviour between school and home

I freely admit this is 'nicked' from the National Autism Society's website and can be found at: <http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understanding-behaviour/behaviour-common-questions-answered/different-behaviour-between-school-and-home.aspx>

So all credit goes to them for this useful article!

My son/daughter behaves differently at home and at school. School say they do not have any behavioural difficulties with him, but at home it is a different matter.

This is quite a common scenario and there may be a number of reasons for this difference in behaviour.

Just because the behaviour occurs at home, it does not necessarily mean the trigger (or the cause) lies there. Your son/daughter may find school very stressful, but keeps their emotions locked up until they get home. Most children with autism do not display the body language and facial expressions you would expect to see when a child is feeling a certain way. Whilst your child may appear relatively calm at school, they may be experiencing very different emotions beneath the surface. Asking a child with autism how they feel may not get the correct response as some children can find spoken communication very difficult and struggle to explain their emotions to someone.

Stress scales

Some children with an ASD, especially Asperger syndrome, find carrying visual stress scales helpful for overcoming these communication obstacles. These scales can be either in the format of a scale from 1-5, a thermometer, or a traffic light system. The idea is that when the child indicates to someone that they are at a '4' or 'amber' (before they reach a '5' or 'red'), they need to be helped in some way to calm their emotions again.

There are also books that you can work through with your child to help understand emotions, which are based around a 1-5 scale. Instead of someone having to ask your child how they are feeling, he/she can show them the appropriate number or colour. Scales also turn emotions - abstract concepts that require imagination to understand fully - into concrete examples of numbers or colours. This is something that children with autism find easier to understand.

If your child finds it difficult to use a scale, they could use a help card instead. This could be a red card, or have the word 'help' or a meaningful symbol on it, which they could carry around. When he/she begins to feel extremely anxious or angry, they can show it to a member of staff or family. It is important that everyone in contact with your child knows what to do if they are shown a card or a stress scale.

Some children may need to be redirected to a different activity, have a quick run outside, or retreat to a quieter part of the school. It can be difficult to find a quiet area, especially in a big mainstream school, but it does not need to be a big space. Some schools will have a curtained-off area where your child could listen to a personal stereo, in order to cut out external noise for a few minutes while they calm down.

Schools can be concerned that by giving a child a card to leave the room, they will hand it over to opt out of situations they do not want to be in, disrupting their education. Strict boundaries need to be given to a child using a card or stress scale, including clear instructions about where your child gets to go, and for how long (using a timer so he can see how long they have). However, effective use of the card could ultimately reduce the amount of disruption to your child's education. Instead of your child being kept in a permanent state of stress in the classroom, they may return to class much more calm and focused.

Releasing stress after the school day

Some parents report behavioural difficulties in their children when they first come home after school, which might be because they are releasing the stress of the school day.

If your son/daughter does this, it might be beneficial to have a period of time straight after school when they can calm down. You could do this by reducing the amount of social interaction your child has straight after school and providing an activity which you think may help them calm down.

What this activity is depends on your child's preferences. If he/she is relatively physical in their frustration, ie: kicking or hitting, providing a trampoline, punch bag or letting them run around the garden may help relieve the stress. Other children like to relax by watching television or listening to music. Some find lights especially soothing, such as a bubble tube or spinning light.

"I have always liked lights and have loads in my room. I have a lava lamp, a disco ball, a UFO lamp. They are just hypnotic and soothing and such a wonderful escape from reality." *Luke Jackson, 2002*

Routine

For some children, the timetable of the school day provides enough structure and routine to help contain any anxiety and stress. Children with autism have a strong preference for routine and this is automatically incorporated into the school environment. Your child may benefit from having a visual timetable for home as well, as it will make the environment more predictable for them. A timetable can either be constructed showing the whole day's activities, half the day, or simply the activities that are now and next. The age/abilities of the child can have a bearing on the complexity of the timetable