People with Asperger Syndrome can be anxious from a very early age due to not understanding the social and communication rules of society. They can find social situations confusing, which can raise their anxiety levels as they often do not understand how to converse appropriately, they may not know what to say, how to behave or how to approach others appropriately. Often, people with AS have difficulty reading non-verbal communications like body language and facial expressions – raised eyebrows, arms crossed, hands on hips, smiles from someone who is annoyed, frowns etc. They may also misinterpret what is said to them, taking things literally or completely misunderstanding what has been said or is expected of them.

People with ASD can benefit from structure in their daily routines and this can help lower their anxiety levels because they know what is happening next. Unlimited free time can be traumatic if they have difficulty in self occupation skills and this alongside their problems with social and communication skills can raise their anxiety levels which could result in negative behaviours.

It is quite normal to feel anxious about certain situations but we need to learn how to deal with anxieties appropriately. Children with AS can find transition times extremely stressful for various reasons. It could be the noise, smells, confusion of so many people in one area, others touching them as they pass by as well as the social and communication difficulties. At break and lunch times, they may have any or all of these anxieties as well as not knowing how to interact with peers appropriately when it comes to playing games or lack understanding of game rules as these often change depending on which children are playing it. They may appear as loners, not wanting the company of others, but many children with AS do want to join in but lack the skills to do so. Other children may not realise their difficulties and therefore leave them out of games but this could cause the child with AS to have low self esteem thinking that others do not want to be with them and that nobody likes them. However, some children with AS like to play alone and after trying to conform with class rules, they may just need time to be autistic and flap their arms or do something to do with their special interest. Their low self esteem can be due to the fact they often set themselves very high targets which may be unachievable, for example to complete a piece of work without mistakes. Then when they do not achieve it they can feel unworthy and low about themselves. Added to this, they are often bullied for being different. To help build their self esteem they need to be told when they are doing something right. When they are being told off, people need to name the behaviour not the child, for example “I don’t like it when you hit me” is preferable to saying “I don’t like you for hitting me”.

Their way of dealing with these frightening social ordeals may be to run away from the situation and hide in a classroom, or their own bedroom at home. Giving children with AS a safe place to go to instead of having a negative behaviour can also help, and this may also work alongside a reward system. Another way to deal with the problem might be to shut down inside and ignore everyone and everything around them, or to vent their frustration and anger in a negative way such as lashing out or other disruptive behaviour.

It may help to keep a diary of a child’s behaviour as this can help give an insight to any patterns that may be occurring, such as certain days, events, people they are with etc. Quite often a child with an ASD will behave well at school giving the impression that everything is fine, but then get home and exhibit negative behaviours. This could be because they feel safe at home to do this and/or they do not have a way of communicating to school staff that they are anxious, particularly in front of peers. A child with AS needs to be able to generalise skills at school and at home and be given opportunities to do so. The need for a generalisation of skills should be listed as part of the child’s Special Educational Needs.

Managing Anxieties

• Many children with AS have poor auditory processing skills and therefore benefit from visual cues alongside verbal instructions, such as visual timetables, labelled drawers etc. They can also benefit from being given warnings that something is about to change, such as a 5 minute warning before both time, a change in lesson or to finish an activity. Some people will also need specific tasks breaking down for them, such as how to have a bath.

• As people with AS have difficulties in social and communication skills, they should be given opportunities to practice these in a safe place where they do not feel threatened or intimidated.

• Often children with AS have good verbal skills but their lack of understanding of what has been said can lead to negative behaviours being exhibited and this can be due to them not knowing how to express themselves appropriately.

• Building some form of physical exercise into their daily routine can help children with AS to concentrate better and lower anxieties.

• People with AS can behave in a negative way because they have not learned other ways to behave and these may need to be taught. Initially, strategies could be written in a book which they can refer to regularly so that they learn them. As new problems arise, more strategies can be added until they build up a bank of positive things they could do in various situations.

• Fiddle toys, such as stress balls, playdough, and exercise can help a child to lower their anxiety levels so that they are able to return to a task.

• Keeping a diary of negative behaviours can help to see if there are patterns to behaviours – such as certain times of the day, certain lessons at school, certain people they are with etc.

• It is common for children with AS to have sensory difficulties such as noise/touch sensitive or be under sensitive where they seek loud noises or firm touch. They may also have sensory issues regarding their diet eg food colours, textures, flavours etc.

• School staff should be aware of the difficulties a child with AS may have during transition times and put strategies in place to help the child succeed eg classroom changes, breaks, lunchtimes, entering and leaving school.

• The child with AS often benefits from having a ‘safe place’ to go when they are anxious. At home this could be their bedroom and at school it could be the library or a specified area outside the main classroom.

• At school, circle time could be used to explain to the class about a child with AS and the difficulties they are having so that the whole class can come up with ideas to help that child but this would need to be agreed with the parents beforehand. Used properly, Circle Time can be a great asset in helping others in the class understand how people with Asperger Syndrome feel, and how
Some things which would not worry them, will cause great concern to the child with AS. Managing Circle Time is a very definite skill: do take advice or training before attempting this in any depth. There are many good books for teachers written on the subject.

- School Emotional Literacy sessions can benefit children with AS because they are for small groups of children who are experiencing similar difficulties such as friendships, behaviours, social skills or listening skills. Knowing that other children have difficulties in the same areas can help lower anxieties for a child with AS.

- Some schools set up a ‘buddy’ system, when two or three classmates have the ‘responsibility’ of taking it in turns to keep an eye on someone who needs help or support in certain situations. The success of such a strategy very much depends on the children’s ages, and making sure that those given this job do not feel they are being asked to do something which is going to become an onerous chore. A small group of ‘buddies’ is preferably to just one: the child with AS may react badly if this friend suddenly wants to play elsewhere, or is absent for some reason.

**Instructions**

Many people with AS have poor auditory processing skills. Limiting the amount of language when giving instructions can help. Too much speech can confuse them, heightening their anxieties and rendering them incapable of carrying out tasks. They may benefit from visual cues, such as written instructions, labelled drawers and cupboards, and visual timetables.

**Home**

Many children with AS are academically able and exhibit few behaviour issues at school giving the impression that they have no problem and are coping. However, when they return home they may exhibit extremely challenging behaviours and this is often because they have contained their anxieties all day at school and now feel safe to release them. Schools need to be aware of this as the child’s educational needs are failing to be met and generalisation of skills should be listed as part of the child’s Special Educational Needs. An Educational Psychology report may be needed to support this.

**Tics and noises**

Sometimes children with AS also have tics or movements which may be deemed odd. Although this may be distracting for others, particularly in class, telling the child to stop would be like someone telling another not to blink – it is impossible. These tics, or movements, are involuntary and the child will need support from the people around them. Making a huge issue of it may in fact exacerbate the tic/movements. The child’s doctor or specialist should be able to advise on this.

**USEFUL CONTACTS**

See also the Cambian Group Information Sheet Asperger Syndrome.

Excellent articles on AS can be found at the American website for OASIS (Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support) – which has now joined with MAAP Services for Autism and Asperger Syndrome to create a single resource for parents. Website: www.aspergersyndrome.org and The National Autistic Society has information on Mental Health and Asperger Syndrome and also on Understanding Behaviour. Website: www.autism.org.uk.

The Mental Health Foundation: Website: www.mentalhealth.org.uk Tel: 020 7803 1100

Has on-line information on anxiety, autism and more. Also has booklet The Anxious Child which you can download from their website and booklet How to overcome Fear and Anxiety also downloadable, or one hardcopy can be sent free of charge (for further copies please telephone for costs). Email: mhf@mhf.org.uk

*This is not a helpline – for URGENT HELP contact: The Samaritans Tel: 08457 90 90 90

The NSPCC has produced a handy little booklet for children / teenagers entitled Worried? Need to talk? covering fear of violence, arguments, abuse, bullying, alcohol, drugs, sex, racism and other things which might be troubling. Available for a small charge from 0207 825 2775 or Email: info@nsppc.org.uk. There is also a linked website at www.worriedneed2talk.org.uk

Parentline Plus Website: www.parentlineplus.org.uk Tel [24 hours a day]: 0808 800 2222

A national charity set up to offer help, support and practical solutions to anyone parenting a child from 0-18+ years on any parenting issues e.g. challenging behaviour, emotional wellbeing, teenagers etc. Offers local parenting groups and workshops, publications, a telephone and email helpline, details on where to go for specialist advice and training for professionals.

Youth Access Website: www.youthaccess.org.uk Helpline open 9.00 – 1.00 and 2.00 – 5.00 Tel: 020 8772 9900

Signposting information service offering: advice, counselling and support services by letter, telephone, fax or email throughout the U.K. to young people. Search their online directory of 300 U.K. agencies to find local support in your area.

**BOOKS AND SOFTWARE**

A good publisher of books on all aspects of Asperger Syndrome is Jessica Kingsley Publishers Website: www.jkp.com.

Moving School? 99 1/2 Tips for Easy Transition is a software programme to support children with special needs during their transition from primary to secondary school. It addresses social, communication and emotional issues. Available from Website: www.transitionssoftware.co.uk or Tel: 07828 129918. They also produce 99 1/2 Top Tips Presents Timetable Maker, a school organisation tool which creates daily and weekly colour-coded timetables.

**Cambian Group**

run Outstanding residential special schools, colleges and homes for children, young people and adults with autistic spectrum disorders, Asperger Syndrome/HFA, severe learning difficulties. Cambian Group can give you advice and send you their prospectuses and information. Please contact Cambian Group.

**Cambian**

is the largest provider of specialist residential education and care for young people with Autism, Asperger Syndrome and other associated complex needs in the United Kingdom. Cambian is trusted by hundreds of parents and over 70 Local Education Authorities. www.cambiangroup.com