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Anxiety ASD and the Power of Preventative Breaks

Research has shown that more than 75% of all children with an ASD experience INTENSE anxious feelings. Today education is full of choices, open ended tasks and constant changes. For most students this makes learning interesting BUT for students with an ASD, ADHD, ODD, etc this creates many challenges and one of these is anxiety.

Anxiety can look like:

- Avoidance of new situations
- Preference for sameness
- Rigidity
- Insisting on same rules/routines
- Social withdrawal
- Anger
- Meltdowns
- Repetitive noise, movement or sentences



Preventative break

It's always worth giving a 10 minute break as it might buy you 50 minutes of work

The Power of Preventative Breaks

You will need to teach students a range of strategies to calm themselves. When you are teaching them, you will begin to notice which ones are more effective at calming. You can then write Social Scripts and use visual cards to help them remember what to do when they feel anxious.

- Students self-regulating their anxiety is a VERY important part of their behaviour management programme.
- A student being able to request a break before a meltdown is a fantastic strategy.

Programmes that can help manage anxiety

- Understanding emotions and emotional control.
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy see *Dr Tony Attwood's* series of books on anger management and anxiety management.
- Relaxation Therapy.
- Sensory Integration Therapy (as sometimes sensory issues can cause anxiety, for example worrying about a whistle in Physical Education).

We must remember that students with ASD feel the vibes and emotions emanating from others. However, it is difficult for them to make sense of these emotions and to work out which one they need to address first.

Key Strategies for Preventative Breaks

There are a range of strategies you can use for breaks and here are some to get you started.

Sensory Breaks

Remember that some children become **hypo** aroused while others **hyper** aroused.

- Chewing (allowing to chew gum, chewy tube etc).
- Quiet area.
- Listening to music.
- Watching liquid timer.
- Humming, rocking.
- Sitting under a table with blanket over it.
- Carrying heavy books, box.
- Lying under a gym mat, weighted vest etc.



Remember:

All of these strategies need to be taught and practiced before they become effective

Physical Breaks

- Mini trampoline.
- Rolling on large exercise ball.
- Star jumps, jumping.
- Push up against wall.
- Walk, run.

Relaxation Breaks

- Counting.
- Breathing.
- Music.
- Imaginary world (some students escape into an imaginary world, this is particularly common for girls on the spectrum).

Non-Threatening Withdrawal: Diversion before Meltdown

- Send on an errand.
- Get them to do a job for you.



When sending on an errand make sure they feel you are helping them and not punishing them!

Solitude Suggestions

- Safe haven.
- Special interest time.
- Book to read.
- Sit away from group. Eg: If you are on the mat, let them sit at a table away from the group or if you are doing group work and the room is noisy, send their group outside.
- If you are lucky enough to have a small room off your classroom, create a space for them to work there.

Other Strategies may include

- Toilet break, Drink and /or Food.
- Talking to mentor.
- Time breaks.