

Supporting Mental Health in Autistic Children



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Introduction

Autism is lifelong and affects how people interact and communicate with the World. It is not a mental health condition, but many autistic children develop mental health problems. Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health conditions experienced by autistic children.

This booklet will explore some of the key factors that contribute to poor mental health in autistic children.

The aim of this booklet is to help schools make informed decisions about how to promote mental health and well-being in autistic children.

Key recommendations:

- Improve autism understanding for all staff via training.
- Try to make the school environment less overwhelming.
- Provide additional support for autistic children and ensure staff are flexible and compassionate in their approaches.

Key Difficulties that Contribute to Poor Mental Health in Autistic Children

There are many factors which can contribute to poor mental health. However, below are some of the key difficulties that cause autistic children to be more susceptible to poor mental health:

1. **General difficulties in coping with uncertainty and change**

It is well known that autistic children can struggle with uncertainty and change. This can lead to persistent states of anxiety that can interfere with everyday functioning.

2. **Sensory processing difficulties**

Due to sensory processing difficulties, autistic children may perceive the World as more uncertain and unpredictable at times, and this can lead to further increased anxiety.

3. **Social communication difficulties**

Difficulties with social communication can make it harder for autistic children to develop strong social connections, which can lead to a feeling of loneliness. Loneliness has been found to be associated with poor mental health, particularly anxiety and depression.

4. **Alexithymia and emotional regulation difficulties**

Alexithymia (difficulties with identifying and describing own emotions) affects many autistic children. It is thought to contribute to mental health problems, as if a child struggles to identify and describe their emotions, it will then be more difficult for them to use emotional regulation strategies effectively. This can result in children using maladaptive emotional regulation strategies (e.g., avoidance or suppression).

5. Masking

When autistic children mask, they hide or compensate for their autistic traits to appear 'normal' and 'fit in'. Masking is particularly common in autistic girls. The process of constantly self-monitoring and adapting to different social situations can be exhausting and denies expression of someone's true self. Therefore, it is understandable that several studies have found associations between masking and poor mental health.

It is important to note that provision that includes adaptations and interventions to support any of the 5 key difficulties (above) will support mental wellbeing in autistic children.

For example...

If we think about difficulty number 1 - providing an autistic child with a visual transition pack (containing photos of their new staff and classroom) may reduce uncertainty about changing class and this in turn may reduce anxiety.

Or number 2 - giving an autistic child access to ear defenders may reduce anxiety over using the toilet, as they can no longer hear the sudden blast of the hand-dryer.


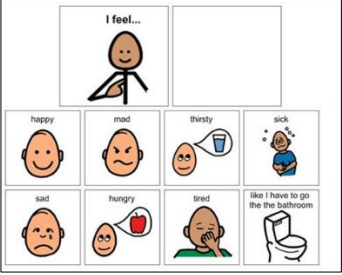

Or number 3 - providing an autistic child with a weekly intervention to explicitly teach social skills may lead to an improvement in social connections for that child and in turn a reduction in low mood due to loneliness.

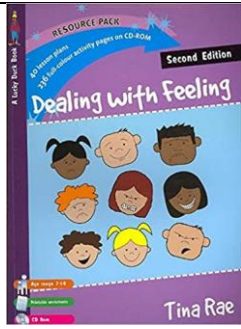
However, the strategies/interventions to support mental health listed in the next section focus on supporting key difficulties 4 and 5 (**alexithymia and emotional regulation**, and **masking**), as these areas are perhaps the most directly linked to poor mental health.

Strategies to Support Alexithymia and Emotional Regulation Difficulties

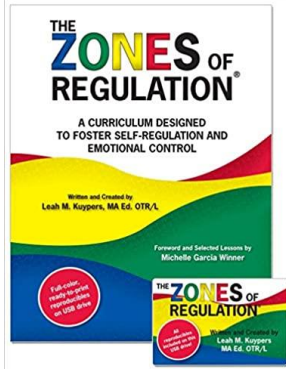


Listed in the table below are some recommended resources to support children to identify and/or regulate their emotions:

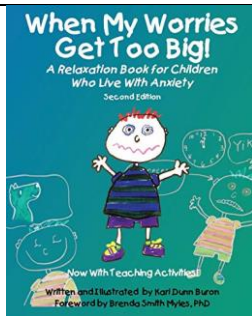
	<p>A key fob of emotion symbols can be used to support young children identify their emotions throughout the day, e.g., when an adult sees a child cry, they can say, "I can see you're feeling sad" and show the symbol and then offer comfort.</p>
	<p>Using a 'feelings board' with a small group of young children provides a fantastic way to model labelling and expressing feelings, e.g., adult says, "I'm feeling a bit angry today because I didn't have any sleep yesterday. How do you feel?"</p>
	<p>The book 'The Colour Monster' by Anna Llenas can be used to help support young children to identify feelings through colours in a fun and gentle way.</p>



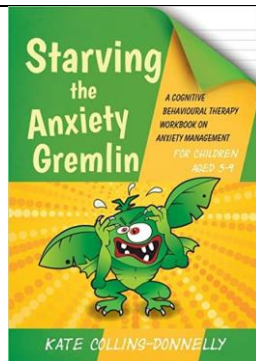
The book 'Dealing with Feeling' by Tina Rae provides teachers of children aged 7-14 with structured opportunities to develop their emotional literacy and emotional wellbeing, with a focus on developing an emotional vocabulary, empathy, tolerance, resilience and motivation.



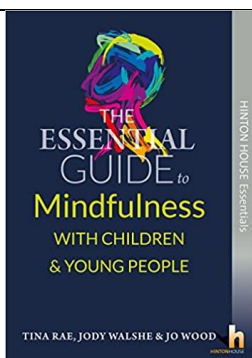
The Zones of Regulation by Leah Kuypers uses a cognitive behaviour approach to help children recognise when they are in different states called 'zones' and learn how to use strategies or tools to stay in a zone or move from one to another. Children explore calming techniques, cognitive strategies, and sensory supports so they will have a toolbox of methods to use to move between zones.



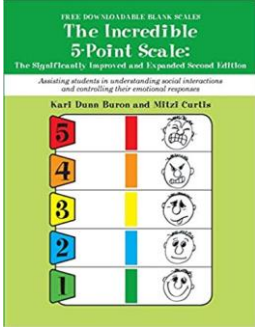
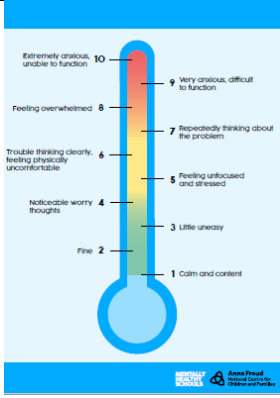


The book 'When My Worries Get Too Big!' by Karl Dunn Buron, helps young children with worry and anxiety. It provides children opportunities to participate in developing their own self calming strategies.



Starving the Anxiety Gremlin by Kate Collins-Donnelly is a unique resource to help young people understand different types of anxiety and how to manage them. Through cognitive behavioural principles, the techniques described help young people to understand why they get anxious and how they can 'starve' their anxiety gremlin in order to manage their anxiety. This work book is designed for children aged 5 to 9 years to work with an adult.



The 'Essential Guide to Mindfulness with Children and Young People' by Tina Rae, Jody Walshe and Jo Wood provides practical and introductions mindfulness-based strategies for promoting emotional and mental well-being in young people.

	<p>'The Incredible 5 Point Scale' by Kari Dunn-Buran and Mitzi Curtis is designed to support children to be aware of their emotions and the stage or level of that emotion. It also helps children notice and respond appropriately to their own and others' social behaviour.</p>
	<p>A feelings thermometer is a good tool to help children understand what feelings they might be experiencing in a given moment. The Anxiety thermometer by Anna Freud helps children and young people to understand the different intensities of anxiety, which can then lead on to helping them develop strategies to cope with the different levels they are feeling.</p>
	<p>The Positive Penguins app is a resilience-building app ideal for children aged 9 to 11 years. The app has a simple 5-minute guided meditation for children to learn to sit, relax and let go of the thoughts as they come into their heads.</p>
	<p>The Molehill Mountain app has been developed by Autistica and King's College London to help autistic people (over 12 years) to understand and self-manage their anxiety.</p>

The above list is not exhaustive and there are many other resources that can support children to identify and/or regulate their emotions. However, the key thing to note is that **encouraging children to identify their emotions and teaching positive strategies to regulate them, will support the development of good mental health.**

Strategies to Support Masking



Masking can be exhausting for autistic children and may be associated with low self-esteem, anxiety, increased emotional overload and meltdowns. Listed below are 5 key strategies to support autistic children who mask in school:

1. Create safe spaces at school

An autistic child who masks may benefit from having a quiet safe space where they can go to relax and unwind. This could reduce their overall stress levels and exhaustion from being at school all day. The space could be as simple as a pop-up tent in primary or having access to the library in secondary.

2. Listen to parents/guardians

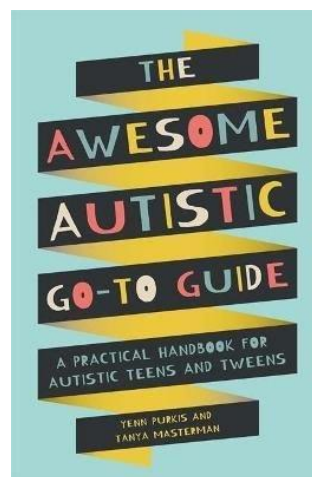
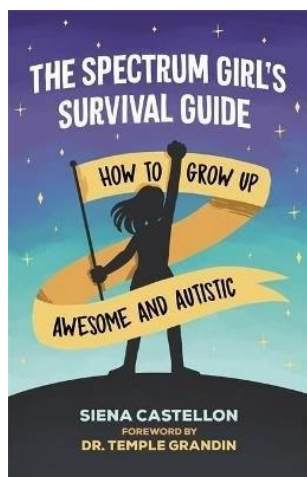
Often autistic children who mask will seem 'perfectly okay' at school but may have meltdowns as soon as they get home. Parents/guardians know their child best, listen to their advice and try to reduce meltdowns at home by reducing stress in school.

3. Play to strengths and provide lots of praise

Some autistic children who mask have low self-esteem and are full of self-criticism. Make sure staff check in regularly with them and let them know that they are valued. Provide praise for their achievements.

4. Provide positive autistic role models

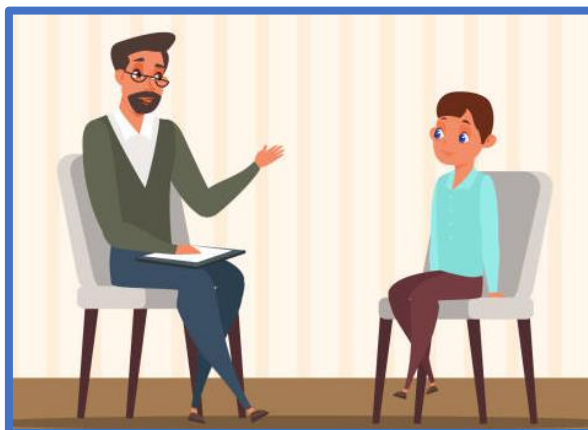
Find other autistic children they can spend time with. Autistic girls often respond to a positive older role model. Feeling part of a community may lessen feelings of alienation and the need to mask. Encourage older children to attend 'autism friendly' events, and read more literature written by autistic authors. These two books are highly recommended:



5. Help them plan difficult situations in advance

Supporting autistic children to understand what will be happening and when, and how they can manage their anxiety if they are feeling overwhelmed, may help them to feel calmer. This in turn may reduce their need to develop masking strategies to avoid social threats.

Counselling and Talking Therapies



Counselling and talking therapies can give children and young people time and space to work through their problems and support them to gain alternative perspectives on issues in a safe environment.

Key advice for school counsellors working with autistic children and young people:

- change the therapy room to make sure it isn't overwhelming
- use simple, plain language
- give time for the child/ young person to process information and answer questions
- offer alternative methods of communication, e.g., do they want to write their feelings down rather than say them?
- ask them if they would like someone close to them to be involved in sessions
- support them to be able to label their own feelings and emotions
- try to incorporate interests if that will help them
- note down what you have covered and share this with the autistic person



<https://www.kooth.com/>

Kooth is a free, safe and anonymous online chat and emotional wellbeing service for young people aged 11 and over. Autistic young people who struggle to communicate their worries and problems face to face may benefit from access to Kooth.

Self-Harm

Self-harm can be defined as 'hurting yourself on purpose'. In recent years in child mental health, there has been an increase in self-harm in both autistic young people and non-autistic young people.

There are many reasons why young people self-harm, including:

- to express distress
- to cope with acute stress
- to cope with an intolerable situation or an issue perceived to be unsolvable
- to escape from a situation
- self-punishment
- a need to feel in control

Self-harm is more common in autistic young people. Some of the reasons why may be the case are:

- increased stress due to social communication demands
- difficulty making and retaining social relationships, leading to social isolation, loneliness, and rejection
- alexithymia and emotional regulation difficulties
- sensory processing difficulties
- masking

What can be done to help autistic young people who self-harm?

The most important thing to remember is that **self-harm is a way of showing distress**.

- Listen and communicate in a way that is best for the young person.
- Identify and try to reduce areas of stress.
- Remove temptations, e.g., sharp objects.
- Stay calm and manage your own emotions.

Remember dealing with young people who self-harm can be extremely challenging and requires patience and persistence.

Where to get medical help for young people who self-harm:

- GP
- CAMHS
- Accident and Emergency (when in crisis).

Useful websites:

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/my-feelings/self-harm/>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/self-harm>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-harm/about-self-harm/>

The Butterfly Project:

This was created for self-harmers who feel they are ready to stop and need the motivation or support to do so.

The idea is simple - The self-harmer simply draws a butterfly on their place(s) of self-harm and, if the butterfly fades without them self-harming, it means it has lived and flown away, giving them a sense of achievement. Whereas if they do self-harm with the butterfly there; they will have to wash it off. If that does happen, they can start again by drawing a new one on.

Further information on the Butterfly Project:

<https://butterfly-project.tumblr.com/>

<https://www.recoveryourlife.com/index.php?categoryid=148>