School Anxiety in Autism

Research Highlight

Why does this research matter to the autism community?

School anxiety is a common experience that can affect any child, often showing up as worry, fatigue, or feeling overwhelmed when parts of the environment don't meet their needs.[1] For autistic students, research has found that social expectations, academic demands, sensory experiences, and the way schools are designed can all contribute to this anxiety.[1]

Research suggests that school anxiety is often linked to the environment, not autism itself. When we assume a child is anxious simply because they are autistic, we can overlook the real challenges they face at school. Understanding these challenges can help families, educators, and schools provide better support.[1]

What does the research show?

Research shows that school anxiety is closely linked to feeling out of place at school. One study found autistic students who felt less accepted at school were more likely to mask, or hide their autistic traits, to fit in. This masking was linked to higher anxiety.[2]

Another study found that many autistic students felt misunderstood by teachers and classmates. They also described loud, busy school environments as overwhelming, making it even harder to feel safe and included.[3]

Together, these studies suggest that belonging, acceptance, and supportive school environments play an important role in reducing school anxiety.

There is no single estimate for school anxiety on its own. However, research shows anxiety is very common among autistic young people. A review of 15 studies of autistic children and youth aged 5 to 14 found that:

About
1 in 3
had high levels of anxiety.[4]

About
1 in 5
had been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.[4]

The most common types of anxiety are:

Specific phobia
Fear of a particular object or situation.

Social anxiety
Feeling worried in social situations.

Generalized anxiety
Ongoing worry about many different things.[4]

What might anxiety look like in autistic children and youth?
Signs of anxiety can look different from child to child. Caregivers say these signs may include:[5]

- Reluctance or refusal to go to school, or difficulty getting out the door in the morning.
- Physical symptoms like stomach aches, nausea, or trouble sleeping the night before school.
- Increased meltdowns, shutdowns, or irritability around school days.
- Withdrawal or reduced participation, even while physically present at school.
- Strong emotional reactions (crying, panic) before, during, or after school.

What's still missing or unclear?

- Most research on school anxiety has not focused on autistic children and youth.
- Some groups are underrepresented in research about difficult school experiences, including girls and young women, older teens, and children and youth with intellectual disabilities or who communicate in ways other than speech.[4,5]

Families looking to support their child's school-related anxiety at home can consider attending one of Autism Ontario's Feel Better Box workshops. These workshops provide practical strategies and coping tools to help autistic children and youth recognize and manage big feelings. The strategies and skills learned through the workshop can be practiced across settings and may help children manage anxiety in the school environment.

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