

OASIS Talk on Tuesday 3rd November 2009

Fiona Knott, lecturer and clinical psychologist at Reading University and Berkshire CAMHS gave a fascinating talk about anxiety in children with ASD. Anxiety in children with ASD this is commonly manifested as phobias; social anxiety ('what will others think'), excessive uncontrollable anxiety, panic (with intense physical symptoms), separation anxiety, school refusal or OCD.

Anxiety can be the result of temperament, genetic factors, stress (life events), social modelling (seeing someone else who is afraid) or reaction from others (reassurance can reinforce an anxiety by 'proving' there is something to be scared of). A child with ASD may be more prone to anxiety because the triad of impairment means they have difficulty in making sense of the world. Not understanding the world makes these young people anxious and will also add to the stress caused by things which happen to them.. Difficult social experiences such as loneliness and bullying can make things worse, as do sensory sensitivities (towards noise, light, touch and texture).

A child with ASD who lacks understanding or insight into his ASD is more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety. The child may also have difficulty in recognising or managing the early signs of anxiety and have few coping strategies. He or she may have difficulty in understanding, predicting or accepting change or imagining alternatives.

Anxiety can be treated by medication (rare but sometime helpful), relaxation, behavioural techniques such as gradually building up confidence in dealing with particular situations and cognitive behaviour therapy (where what you think affects the way you feel and act). Cognitive behaviour therapy helps to 'catch and challenge' negative thoughts and replace them with more balanced thoughts and is combined with relaxation and behavioural work to test out the thought.

Parents can help by showing 'courageous coping' (demonstrating actions and rational thinking), discouraging avoidance which does not help in the long term, and by limiting reassurance (otherwise your child will constantly seek your reassurance – it is far better to give them a social story, which they can refer to themselves).

Helpful aids include a visual thermometer, to show levels of anxiety linked to physical signs and situations which they have experienced before or a toolbox of ideas or activities to self-calm when anxious. Reward and cheerlead your child's courageous coping, with positive self talk to encourage gradual steps to face the feared situation. A ladder of steps is a useful tool, so your child can practise each step until it feels easy. Also, try to pair the anxious thought with a relaxation or pleasant thought, a brave thought or a more accurate thought.

Cognitive behaviour therapy is showing great promise, but more research with large scale trials is needed in order to understand anxiety and ASD in greater detail and to determine what works and what doesn't. There is also a project to investigate whether the link that exists between parental and child anxiety holds true for ASD, given that having a child with ASD means that you have a lot to be worried about.

If you are interested in helping with the research, or would like to learn more, please email f.j.knott@reading.ac.uk or call 0118 378 8529 and leave a message.

Useful resources:

www.embracethefuture.org.au which has lots of resources about emotions and coping

Overcoming Your Child's Fears and Worries by Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willetts
Overcoming Your Child's Shyness and Social Anxiety by Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willetts