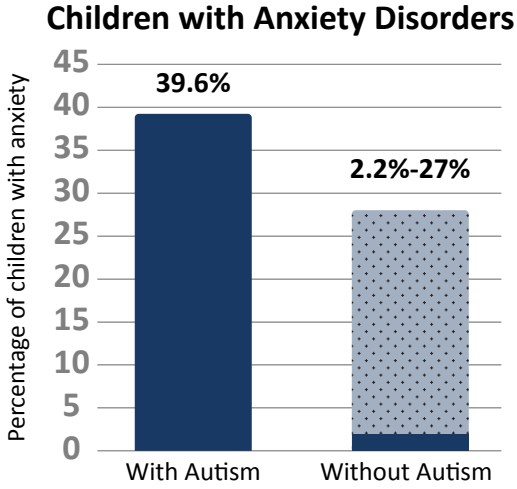
Autism, Anxiety, and the Five Prime Suspects

Christopher Lynch, Ph.D

Anxiety is a pervasive problem in autism, and this appears to be the case across the full age range, including for children and adolescents. Research has shown, for example, that children on the autism spectrum are more likely to suffer from anxiety, with close to 40 percent having at least one diagnosable anxiety disorder.[1]

Research also shows that anxiety can have a substantial impact on the lives of children on the autism spectrum and those who support them. For example, parents often report that the impact of anxiety in their children can be more substantial than the impact of autism itself.[2] In addition, anxiety has been found to significantly contribute to and interact with sleep problems and challenging behavior in children on the spectrum.[3]

These findings are consistent with my clinical experience as a child psychologist. Although anxiety is not listed as a core symptom of autism, it is often the primary reason why children on the spectrum are brought to my office.



This bar graph depicts the current statistics for children with anxiety disorders. Anxiety is reported in 39.6% of children with Autism (ages 3-17) and only 2.2%-27% of typically developing children (van Streensel FJA, Heeman EJ. J Child Fam Stud. 2017; 26(7): 1753-1767). The figures in this graph represent those children who have a diagnosable Anxiety Disorder, as determined through research studies. It is worth noting that there are likely many more children with autism who have high levels of anxiety, even though they have not met the criteria to be diagnosed with a disorder. Researchers also note that it is very difficult to measure the actual prevalence rate of anxiety in children, both on the spectrum and not, due to the overlap of many co-existing conditions, poor language skills, poor cognitive skills and lack of ability to convey emotional states.

Why do you need to find the cause of anxiety before treating it?

Knowing the factors that contribute to anxiety will lead to the best solutions. It's sort of like having a car that's making a funny sound. You need to find out what's making the sound before going in and changing parts. The cause of the sound is going to lead you to the solution. Symptoms of anxiety are the 'sounds' that are telling you something is wrong. However, you need to find out what's causing the anxiety before addressing it.

What causes so much anxiety in children on the autism spectrum?

Children on the autism spectrum can be anxious for the same reasons as any other children, including school, family, health, and so on. However, I find that there are five factors related to autism that tend to show up repeatedly in the children I work with. For this reason, I call them my "Five Prime Suspects." The suspects are detailed in my newest resource, *Anxiety Management for Kids on the Autism Spectrum: Your Guide to Preventing Meltdowns and Unlocking Potential.*

Briefly, the Five Prime Suspects are:

1	COGNITIVE RIGIDITY	People on the spectrum tend to process the world by details. This can be a wonderful strength for tasks requiring strong factual memory or attention to detail. However, processing by details rather than by context can create anxiety during times of change or transition. Without context, a child on the spectrum can be thrown off and confused when changes occur unexpectedly or when he/she has to move from one situation to another.
2	SENSORY SENSITIVITIES	Children on the spectrum have difficulty regulating sensory input. Sensations that wouldn't bother most children may seem harsh to a child on the spectrum and can result in high levels of distress. Sensitivities can occur with the traditional senses — hearing, sight, taste, touch, smell — but can also extend to other senses such as balance, temperature and pain.
3	COMMUNICATION BARRIERS	There is a high occurrence of speech and language processing disorders in autism. When not adequately accommodated, these disorders can create frustration and anxiety in situations that place high demands on communication.
4	SOCIAL CHALLENGES	Social situations can pose a number of challenges for children on the spectrum. Difficulty with understanding social rules and nuances can create strain and anxiety, particularly in large, unstructured situations such as a playground or birthday party.
5	TASK FRUSTRATION	Children on the autism spectrum have many talents. However, there are some areas where they may struggle. Common areas of struggle include: fine motor skills, reading comprehension, and expressive writing. It's not that children on the spectrum can't improve at these tasks. However, there may be times when they require additional supports and accommodations to reduce frustration and anxiety.

Determining the suspect or suspects causing anxiety

Identifying which suspects are responsible for anxiety takes some detective work. Ask these questions:

- ***Where and when does my child display signs of anxiety?***
- ***Who is around when my child shows signs of anxiety?***
- ***What demands are being placed on my child when he/she seems anxious?***
- ***When is my child usually calmest?***

The answers to these types of questions can lead to clues about which factors are driving your child's distress. Bear in mind that there is often more than one suspect contributing to your child's anxiety at any given time.

From assessment to treatment planning

Once you have determined which suspects are causing anxiety, it's time to plan and take action. The cause of your child's anxiety will lead you to the most appropriate solutions.

Some common solutions for each of the five suspects include:

1 COGNITIVE RIGIDITY	Prepare for upcoming changes; use visual supports to guide through transitions; maintain a reasonable degree of structure and consistency
2 SENSORY SENSITIVITIES	Minimize harsh stimulation (for example, reduce noise, use natural lighting, avoid strong smells); use tools and technology (for example, noise cancellation headphones, soft light, sound absorbing tiles)
3 COMMUNICATION BARRIERS	Use visual supports; add coping-related words and phrases to communication systems; use reduced language during times of distress
4 SOCIAL CHALLENGES	Set up smaller, more structured social situations to boost confidence; practice social skills; assist with decoding social rules; foster tolerance and acceptance
5 TASK FRUSTRATION	Provide accommodations to address areas of struggle; modify tasks to suit each child's unique learning style; alternate frustrating tasks with easier tasks; provide breaks from frustrating work

Once you have determined which suspects are causing anxiety, it's time to plan and take action. The cause of your child's anxiety will lead you to the most appropriate solutions.

The Need to Teach Anxiety Management Strategies

All of the above will help to prevent or reduce anxiety in children on the spectrum. However, despite our best intentions, we will never completely eliminate anxiety in children on the spectrum (or in any other child). In addition, there may not always be a supportive person nearby who can identify and quickly address sources of distress. Thus, it is also important that we give our children tools to cope with anxiety. This will provide a sense of control over distressing situations and promote greater independence.

"There may not always be a supportive person nearby who can identify and quickly address sources of distress. It is also important that we give our children tools to cope with anxiety."

I find that, with some modifications, children on the spectrum can learn and apply relaxation or anxiety management strategies effectively. Strategies that I often teach are compiled in *Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool*, a stress and anxiety management workbook specifically designed for neurodiverse children.

Conclusion

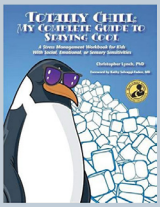
Anxiety is a pervasive problem for children on the autism spectrum. However, careful assessment of the causes of this anxiety can lead to effective strategies for relief. These strategies, in combination with teaching relaxation skills, will help to reduce distress and behavioral challenges.

References

1. Van Steensel, F. J., Bögels, S.M., & Perrin, S. (2011). Anxiety disorders in children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders: a meta-analysis. *Clinical child and family psychology review*, 14 (3), 302.
2. Oszivadjian, A., Knott, F., & Magiati, I. (2012). Parent and child perspectives on the nature of anxiety in children and young people with autism spectrum disorders: a focus group study, *Autism*, 16(2), 107-121
3. Rzepecka, H., McKenzie, K., McClure, I., & Murphy, S. (2011). Sleep, anxiety, and challenging behavior in children with intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 32 (6), 2758-2766.

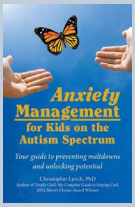


Christopher Lynch, Ph.D is a child psychologist who specializes in stress and anxiety management for children and teens who are on the autism spectrum. He is currently the Director of the Pediatric Behavioral Medicine Department at Goryeb Children's Hospital where he developed the Aspirations Life Management program. Christopher Lynch, Ph.D has over 20 years of experience in working with children, including five years in Ireland. He has written two books on the topic of anxiety management and autism including the award-winning *Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool and Anxiety Management for Kids on the Autism Spectrum: Your Guide to Preventing Meltdowns and Unlocking Potential*. Christopher Lynch, Ph.D provides talks and seminars to a wide range of audiences and also writes a blog for Psychology Today on "Autism and Anxiety". See www.morethanbehavior.com for additional information and resources.



Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool

Christopher Lynch, Ph.D



Anxiety Management for Kids on the Autism Spectrum: Your Guide to Preventing Meltdowns and Unlocking Potential

Christopher Lynch, Ph.D

For information only. Views, recommendations, findings and opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Autism Advocate Parenting Magazine Inc. or anyone otherwise involved in the magazine. The magazine and others are not responsible for any errors, inaccuracies or omissions in this content. The magazine provides no guarantees, warranties, conditions or representations, and will not be liable with respect to this content. Please read our full terms here.