

Summary of results for “Anxiety in people with Asperger Disorder/high functioning autism: An exploration and intervention”
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All children who participated in the project were included in the anxiety intervention program. To assess suitability, parent and child interviews were conducted prior to the commencement of the intervention. Post-intervention and follow-up questionnaires were mailed for participants to complete. 10 of 23 participants provided post-intervention data and 9 of 23 provided teacher responses. Interesting information was provided about the nature of anxiety in this population in the pre-test questionnaires and this was written up for my thesis. Intervention data will be written up subsequently. Please find a summary of the findings documented below.

Reports of anxiety and depression from twenty three children, 11 with high functioning autism (HFA) and 12 with Asperger syndrome (AS) who were identified as having problems with anxiety were compared to parental reports of the child's anxiety and depression. Eight parents enquired about their children's inclusion in the project, but were unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts, or were located too far away. Two children did not participate because their anxiety was prohibitively high and the group situation did not suit them.

The purpose of the study was to explore the presentation of anxiety and depression in children with AS and HFA from the child's and the parent's perspective, and to compare differences between reports of child anxiety and depression by parents and children. Children completed a questionnaire about their anxiety and depression. The parents and the child's teacher also completed a questionnaire about the child's anxiety and depression. Although high levels of child depression and anxiety were reported by both children and parents, children reported lower levels of both anxiety and depression than their parents. Children also completed a questionnaire about the types of anxiety they most frequently experience. Anxiety disorders most commonly reported by children were animal phobia, blood-injection-injury phobia, social phobia obsessive compulsive disorder and situational-environmental phobia. While high levels of social phobia were reported by the AS group, no children with HFA reported clinical levels of social phobia. In a sample of nine children, exploratory comparisons were also undertaken between reports of anxiety and depression according to teachers, parents, and children. Findings suggest that parents and teachers rated higher child depression scores than the children. Interestingly, parents rated higher levels of child anxiety than both teachers and children.

These studies confirm that some children with AS and HFA who have been identified as anxious also experience difficulties with depression, display clinically significant levels of depression and are able to report their distress. Future studies should build upon this work by addressing some of the limitations: examining a larger, randomised group of children who are not identified as having difficulties with anxiety; and continuing the systematic evaluation of perceptions of child anxiety from the perspective of parent, teacher and child. Results of future studies may be used to promote awareness about the nature of anxiety and depression in this group and develop intervention programs to assist individuals with AS and HFA to reduce distress associated with anxiety and depression.

Finally, the trend suggesting a difference between children with AS and HFA in the reported levels of social phobia and blood-injection-injury phobia continues to fuel the controversial debate over the classification of AS as a unique diagnostic entity. Resolution of this debate may depend on a better understanding of the genetic mechanisms associated with the disorders to confirm different etiological pathways (Starr, et al., 2003). If children with AS are indeed more likely to develop social phobia or blood-injection-injury phobia, services to address these difficulties will need to be developed. Future research into these differences is therefore warranted.