DRAGONFLY Impact Education
Empowering Young Lives

15 Top Tips
for children and young people with ASD:
Reducing Anxiety Around Social Situations

The Social Curriculum

If the purpose of education is to prepare a young person for adult life, this is an essential part of the curriculum. It's sometimes referred to as 'soft skills' – how we're able to relate to others. Understanding how to speak, behave and respond in different social situations; understanding how to adapt these things in response to different circumstances and other people's reactions - these aren't subjects that appear on a timetable, and they're not skills that are often explicitly taught, but they underpin all interactions: in schools, the workplace and wider society.

Addressing Alexithymia

Alexithymia – difficulty with attachment and relationships because of an inability to identify or define emotions.

Self-Awareness & Regulation

Being aware of how to identify, process and regulate feelings is important for social connection and effective learning.

1. **Give language to feelings**

   Start with 'easy' emotions (e.g. 'happy) and do one at a time. Make a collage of images from google which represent/show each emotion.

2. **Recognise the feeling**

   Ask them to make a playlist of songs or choose a part of a film or book that show how they're feeling.

3. **Spot the feeling without words**

   Play a game – emotions charades, emotional statues or the 'face game' – guessing the message from the facial expression (e.g. raised eyebrows/a frown).

4. **Spot the feeling when the words don't match**

   Tone of voice game – guess the meaning of the same sentence said in different tones of voice. For both 3&4 remember that the autistic mind looks for differences, not similarities. Help them to make generalisations by pointing out the same expressions/tones used by characters in TV shows.

5. **Communicate by text**

   Older children sometimes like to sit on the other side of the room/in their bedroom and text how they're feeling. It allows expression without direct interaction and gives processing time.

6. **Scrapbooking feelings**

   Again, taking one emotion at a time, build a scrapbook of experiences. Write the name of the emotion at the top of the page and write down when it was felt, what happened, what the physical sensations were, and include photographs or pictures.

7. **Mood diary**

   Have scales of 0 – 20 for each 'pair' of feelings: happy/sad; relaxed/anxious; affection/anger; smart/stupid. The first feeling is scored 20, the second feeling is scored 0. 10 is the 'testing point'

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where the feeling becomes stronger/more difficult. Use this as a talking point to think about when they might need to use a 'tool' (below).

8. Never lie, never promise, avoid the word 'no'

These can be triggers for an intense emotional reaction that is difficult to regulate (a meltdown!). Be as clear and straightforward and possible and use 'First x, then y' (e.g. 'first dinner, then a treat' / 'first homework and then PlayStation').

9. Be a SATNAV

Instead of pointing out what they've done wrong, state simply and neutrally what they need to do next – give them course corrections.

10. Have an evidence file

Give them positive personality adjectives to describe themselves (kind, thoughtful, funny, brave etc). Each time they do or say something that shows that quality, write it down as tangible evidence or include a photo.

11. Model managing emotions

Imagine what you say and do when in a stressful situation. Vocalise your thought processes – let them internalise your voice. (E.g. 'I've lost my keys and I feel panicked because now I will be late. I'm going to keep calm because that way I can think more clearly. I'll take 3 deep breaths…')

12. The emotional toolbox

Everyone responds to different calming/regulating techniques. Often, people who have trouble regulating strong emotions simply don't have enough tools. Increase the number of tools they have by exposing them to different ways of regulating themselves: smells, something they can touch/squeeze, physical activity, being with animals, solitude, mindfulness, validating their feelings, special 1:1 time with an adult – equip them with as many different tools as possible.

13. Rehearsals

If there's a situation they find stressful or difficult, rehearse it with them. Practise remaining calm. If things go wrong, rewind and try again differently.

14. Use a Fitbit

These can produce graphs of your heart rate throughout the day, allowing you to identify trigger points and when might be a good time to use a regulating 'tool'. There's also a relaxation tool if the heart rate starts to rise because of a stressful situation. Staying calm = thinking clearly.

15. Scales of justice

When dealing with conflict with a peer/sibling, use a visual representation of the 'severity' of events to demonstrate the balance of responsibility. (This needs to be done when calm!)
E.g. "Joe gets a lego block for name calling. You called him a name back, so that's a lego block for you. Then he shouted – that's 2 more lego blocks for Joe. Then you hit him – physical violence is more serious than shouting, so that's 3 more blocks for you. Even though Joe started it, you have more lego blocks because of how you responded, so you have a consequence."