



What is: Anxious Non-Attendance and How may it Impact Autistic Children and Young People?

This is a resource for parents of autistic children and young people on the topic of anxious non-attendance in schools. The resource explains what anxious non-attendance is and explores how to support.



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Disclaimer



This resource provides information that is believed to be accurate and has been fact-checked in good faith.



However, given the nature of this topic, some information may be considered health related. Any health-related information is constantly evolving, so it is essential to stay informed and review the latest guidance.

Please note that this resource does not constitute, nor is it a substitute for, personalised professional medical advice.



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The AET Values Voice: The making of this resource

All our training materials and resources are co-produced with young people, parents/carers and professionals across the ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, gender and disability diversity.

The Autism Education Trust (AET) is supported by a panel of Autistic Young Experts who consult on AET projects, materials and strategy. Since 2016, this group of young people, aged 16-25, have shared their voice and lived experiences to steer the work we do.

In addition, the panel have been involved in activities such as: speaking at events; co-delivering training; sharing their experiences with professionals on film; and contributing to national consultations and research projects.



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The AET Values Voice: The making of this resource



In their own words, the Autistic Young Experts describe what they do below:



We are a panel made up of autistic young people from across England.



We have different experiences of education and of being autistic.



Education types vary and include home education, mainstream, specialist, alternative provision, college and university.



While we are all autistic, that doesn't make our experiences the same. Many of us struggled with education and we don't want that to be the experience for other autistic young people.



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The AET Values Voice: The making of this resource

Click [here](#) to watch a short video and meet the Autistic Young Experts.



Video

The panel have coproduced the AET's module about Anxious Non-Attendance and their experience is included within this guide.

In addition to the panel of Autistic Young Experts, contributors to this module also include Helen Spiers, Head of Counselling with Mable Therapy, and parents and carers of children and young people experiencing Anxious Non-Attendance.



Autistic
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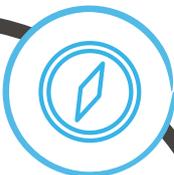
In the **What is? Series**, we answer some of your most frequently asked questions about autism.

In this guide:



What is: Anxious Non-Attendance and How may it Impact Autistic Children and Young people?

This guide is **part one of three** resources for parents on **supporting their child with Anxious Non-Attendance**. The **second** resource looks at **how to** provide support and the **third** provides a **toolkit of resources**, to make supporting your child even easier.



What is: Anxious Non-Attendance and How may it Impact Autistic Children and Young People?



How to: Support your Child with Anxious Non-Attendance.



Tools to: Support Your Child with Anxious Non-Attendance



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Section 1:

What is 'Anxious Non-Attendance'?

This resource focuses on supporting autistic children and young people experiencing **Anxious Non-Attendance (ANA)**, which is often referred to as '**Emotionally Based School Avoidance**' (EBSA).



Children and young people who are described as experiencing ANA / EBSA often have absences that are:

- **Prolonged**
- **Increasing over time**
- Following periods of **transition** (for example, from primary to secondary school, across key stages, or from Year 7 to Year 8).

ANA / EBSA is not necessarily **complete** absence from school - the child or young person may be attending school regularly, but **avoiding certain lessons** or being **frequently late**.

This resource will refer to this kind of absence as '**Anxious Non-Attendance**' rather than using the term 'Emotionally Based Schools Avoidance,' in accordance with the preferences of our Autistic Young Experts.

The **AET Terminology Guide**, coproduced with the **Autistic Young Experts**, states that:

'An 'anxious non-attender' is the term used for a child or young person experiencing persistent absences due to 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance' (EBSA). This is when attendance difficulties arise from experiencing high levels of anxiety at school.'

The AET Autistic Young Experts panel preferred the term 'Anxious Non-Attender' over 'school refuser' because:

'School refuser' sounds negative as though the child is trying to be difficult or behaving in a certain way on purpose, where really they are lacking support to access the environment.

(Autistic Young Experts)



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Section 2:

What is the Link Between Autism and Anxiety?



'Anxiety is usually a natural response to pressure, feeling afraid or threatened, which can show up in how we feel physically, mentally, and in how we behave. It's common to describe anxiety as a feeling of dread, fear or unease, which can range from mild to severe... It's usually when our anxiety feels really intense or overwhelming that it starts to interfere with our daily life or affect our relationships.'

(NHS, Last Accessed: December 2024)

Anxiety is common generally but it is more common in neurodivergent people than in neurotypical people.



Our brains usually develop in similar ways, but no two brains work the same way. Being neurodivergent means a person's brain works in a different way to most other people, who can be described as neurotypical. This doesn't mean a neurodivergent person's brain works better or worse – it just works differently. **Autistic people may also describe themselves as being neurodivergent.**

Every autistic person is unique, however, and some may show signs of anxiety more obviously than others. They may also experience unique anxiety triggers that neurotypical people may not.

For example:



A neurotypical person may not be bothered by a projector buzzing, but an autistic person may find this impossible to 'tune out.' As a result, this may cause the autistic person additional anxiety.



In the same way, an unexpected change in a schedule may cause significantly more anxiety for an autistic person than someone who is neurotypical.



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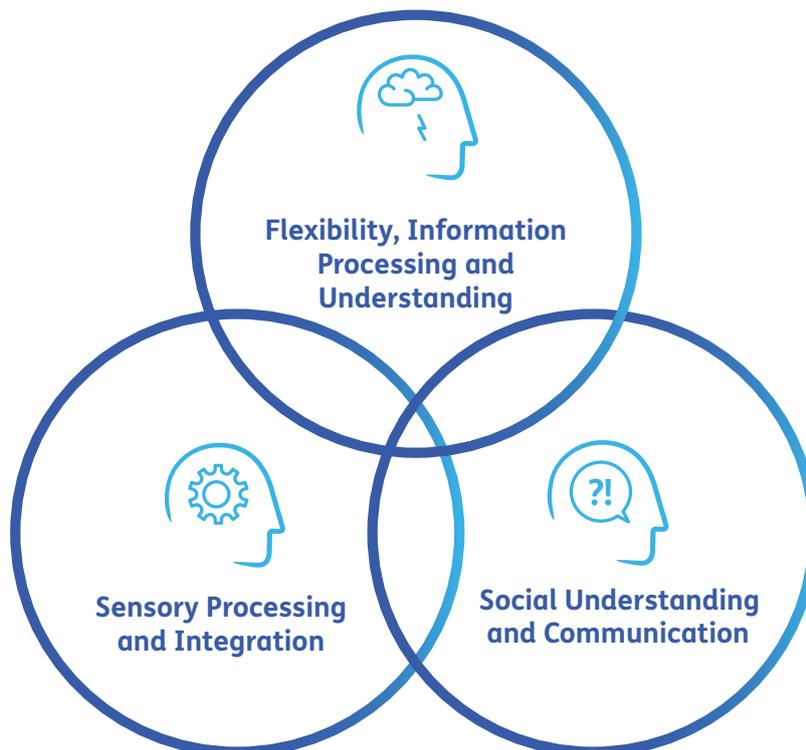
Section 2:

What is the Link Between Autism and Anxiety?

Anxiety triggers will be unique to each individual.

These anxiety triggers may be connected to the **Three Areas of Difference** in autism:

- **Flexibility** is how we handle change.
- **Information processing** is how we understand sights, sounds and feelings.



- **Sensory processing** is how the brain takes in information through the senses – e.g. sights, sounds, tastes and smells.
- **Integration** is about how our brains combine this information to understand and respond to the world around us.

- **Social understanding** is:
 1. Understanding how we feel and why we act a certain way.
 2. Understanding how others feel and why they act a certain way.
- **Communication** describes how we share thoughts, feelings or information with others using words, gestures, facial expressions or symbols.



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Section 2:

What is the Link Between Autism and Anxiety?

Many autistic pupils will experience high levels of anxiety in school as result of the Three Areas of Difference and this could lead to distressed behaviour.



Distressed behaviours are the **stress response** of an autistic individual who is experiencing **extreme overwhelm**. This can be referred to as '**overwhelm**' and '**sensory overload**.' Each autistic learner will have their own experience of how distressed behaviour and extreme overwhelm feels for them. As with all behaviour, behaviours that indicate distress will be **unique** to each autistic individual. Some behaviours may be visible externally (for example, crying or anger) and some may be held more internally (for example, exhaustion or confusion), which can often be subtle.

For an autistic person, the intensity of anxious feelings may occur on a daily basis and be highly exhausting.

'For autistic pupils, anxiety may also be caused by not being able to make sense of things going on around them, and feeling misunderstood or unaccepted by people who are not autistic.'

(NHS, 2022)



Autistic children and young people (diagnosed and undiagnosed) are **more likely** to experience anxiety as a result of the **Three Areas of Difference**.



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Section 3:

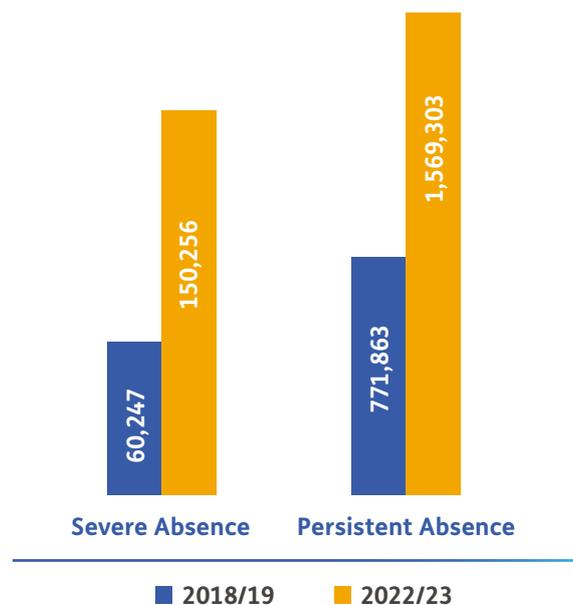
What is the Link Between Autism, Anxiety and Difficulties with Attendance?

Following the COVID pandemic, there has been increased attention on the rising number of pupils in England and Wales who are either 'missing' from education or who are missing a substantial amount of their time in school.

The UK Government define '**Persistent Absence**' as **missing 10% of all sessions** and '**Severe Absence**' as **missing 50% of all sessions**.

During the academic year **2022/23**, there were **1,569,303** 'persistent absentees' and **150,256** 'severe absentees' in England (out of **all pupils** - these figures are not specifically for Anxious Non-Attendance and will include other causes) (GOV.UK).

Figures for 2018/19 show the extent of the increase since the pandemic, with **771,863** 'persistent absentees' and **60,247** 'severe absentees' at that time (GOV.UK).



It is important to highlight that Anxious Non-Attendance is **not a choice** – often the child or young person wants to be in school like their friends and peers, and can feel very frustrated and distressed when they cannot. They can also experience a high level of anxiety about what might happen to them, their family, and in the future if they cannot go to school. This makes it more important to approach the issue calmly and with care.



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Section 3:

What is the Link Between Autism, Anxiety and Difficulties with Attendance?

Signs of Anxious Non-Attendance that you may notice in your child or young person may include:

Behaviour	Emotions	Attitude to School
Withdrawn	Separation anxiety	Reluctance to engage
Spending more time alone	Low self-esteem	Negative talk about school
Signs of self-harm	Low mood	Becoming distressed when school is mentioned
Late for school	Crying	Refusing to get ready for school
Missing lessons or truanting	Angry outbursts	Worried about falling behind
Feigning illness	Panic attacks	Disengaged
Physical symptoms	Emotional shutdown	Difficulties with friends

(Mabel Therapy, www.mabletherapy.com)



Although there are no specific figures available relating specifically to Anxious Non-Attendance and autistic pupils, data from **2023/24** showed that **55,929 autistic pupils** in England were 'persistent absentees' and **8,415** were 'severely absent' (GOV.UK). This data **will not** include autistic or neurodivergent pupils yet to receive a diagnosis. These undiagnosed pupils are perhaps more likely to be experiencing even higher levels of anxiety and therefore absence, due to unmet support needs.



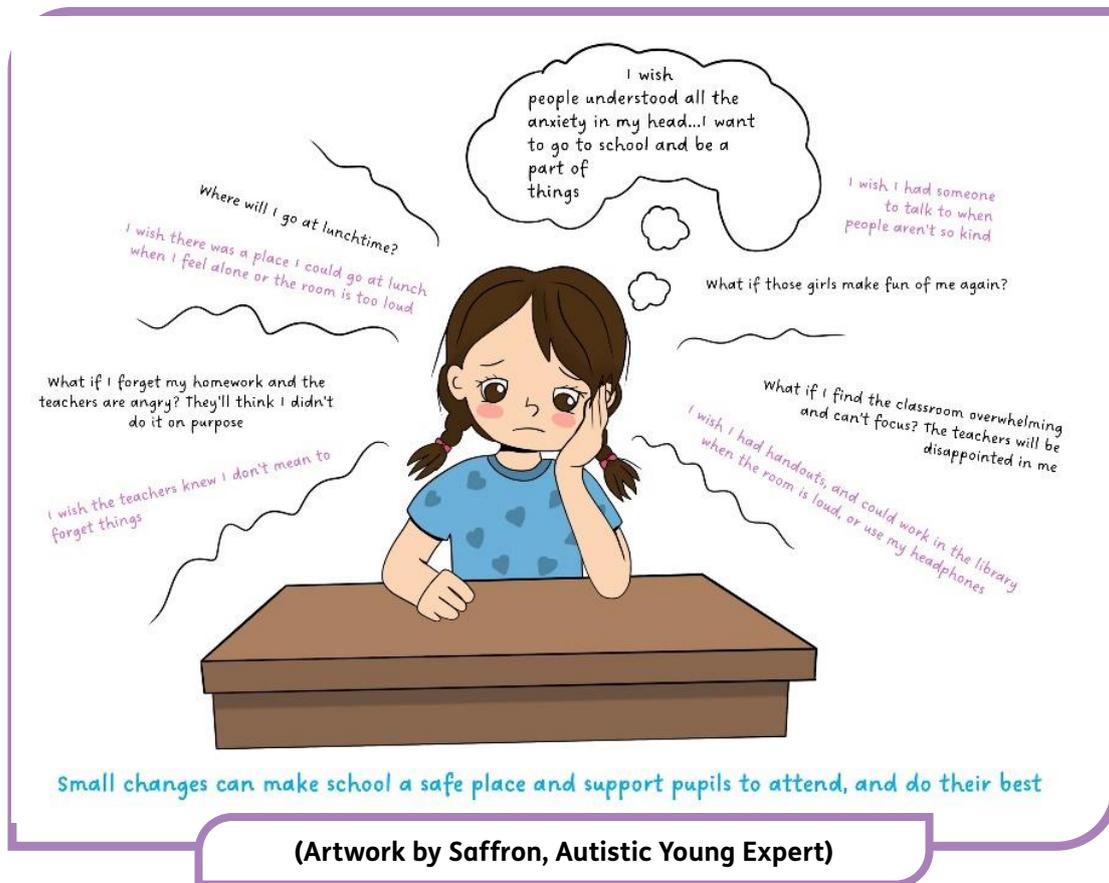
Autistic and other neurodivergent children and young people (diagnosed and undiagnosed) are more likely to experience Anxious Non-Attendance.



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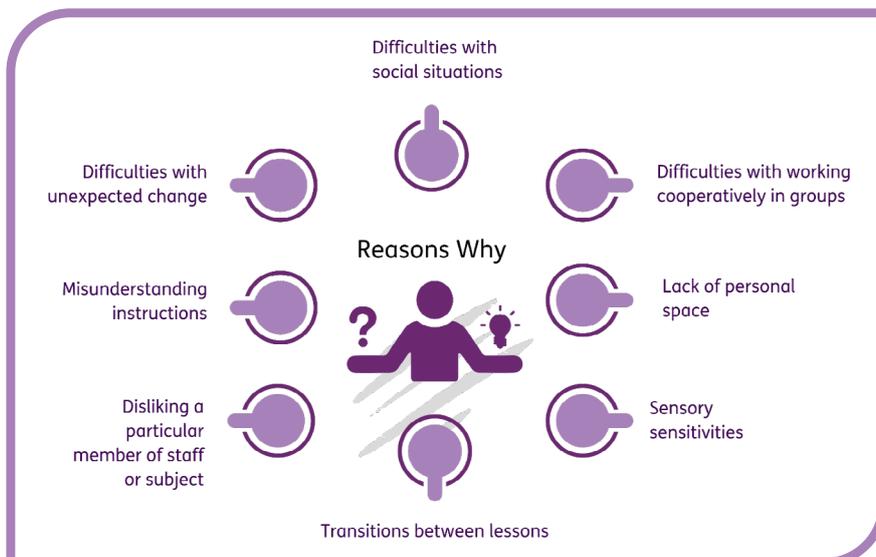
Section 4:

Why do Many Autistic Children and Young People Have Difficulties with Attending School?



As we explored in **Section 2**, many of the reasons autistic children and young people find it challenging to attend school are related to the **Three Areas of Difference**.

Some of these reasons are shown below:



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Section 4:

Why do Many Autistic Children and Young People Have Difficulties with Attending School?

This list is not meant to cover all of the reasons an autistic child or young person may find the school environment challenging, potentially leading to anxiety and increased absence – it is important to **talk** and **listen** to **your** child or young person to establish the reasons for their anxiety as they will be unique to them.

When your child's reasons are known and understood, you may then be able to work alongside the school to address the causes of anxiety.

It is vital that staff working with your child or young person understand what is causing their anxiety so that **reasonable adjustments** and **appropriate support** can be provided. It is important that schools listen to the experiences of the child or young person and their family, as often they may not see the full picture.

Autistic children and young people can do what is sometimes called **masking** their anxiety in school in an effort to 'fit in' with expectations. This means they may try to hide how they feel at school and different behaviour may be seen at home.



Even if the anxiety is seen and felt at home, if it is a result of things that are happening in school, then the only way to support the child is for **schools and families to work together.**



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Section 4:

Why do Many Autistic Children and Young People Have Difficulties with Attending School?

We asked the Autistic Young Experts about their experiences of **Anxious Non-Attendance**. Explanations they gave included:

Between the ages of 12 and 15 I began to struggle with school and my mental health declined considerably. Social pressures but also particular lessons with teachers I was afraid of or that involved activities I struggled with, like public speaking, led to high anxiety that meant I was too anxious to attend.

Autistic Young Expert

Adults don't like busy places, so they avoid them all the time. So why is school any different?

Autistic Young Expert

Sometimes I had experienced forgetting my homework once and then the memory of that would make me too anxious to feel comfortable going.

Autistic Young Expert

For me, walking through the door was like getting ready for battle.

Autistic Young Expert

PE was unbearable. Even having a diagnosis of dyspraxia at the time... I was put in humiliating situations.

Autistic Young Expert



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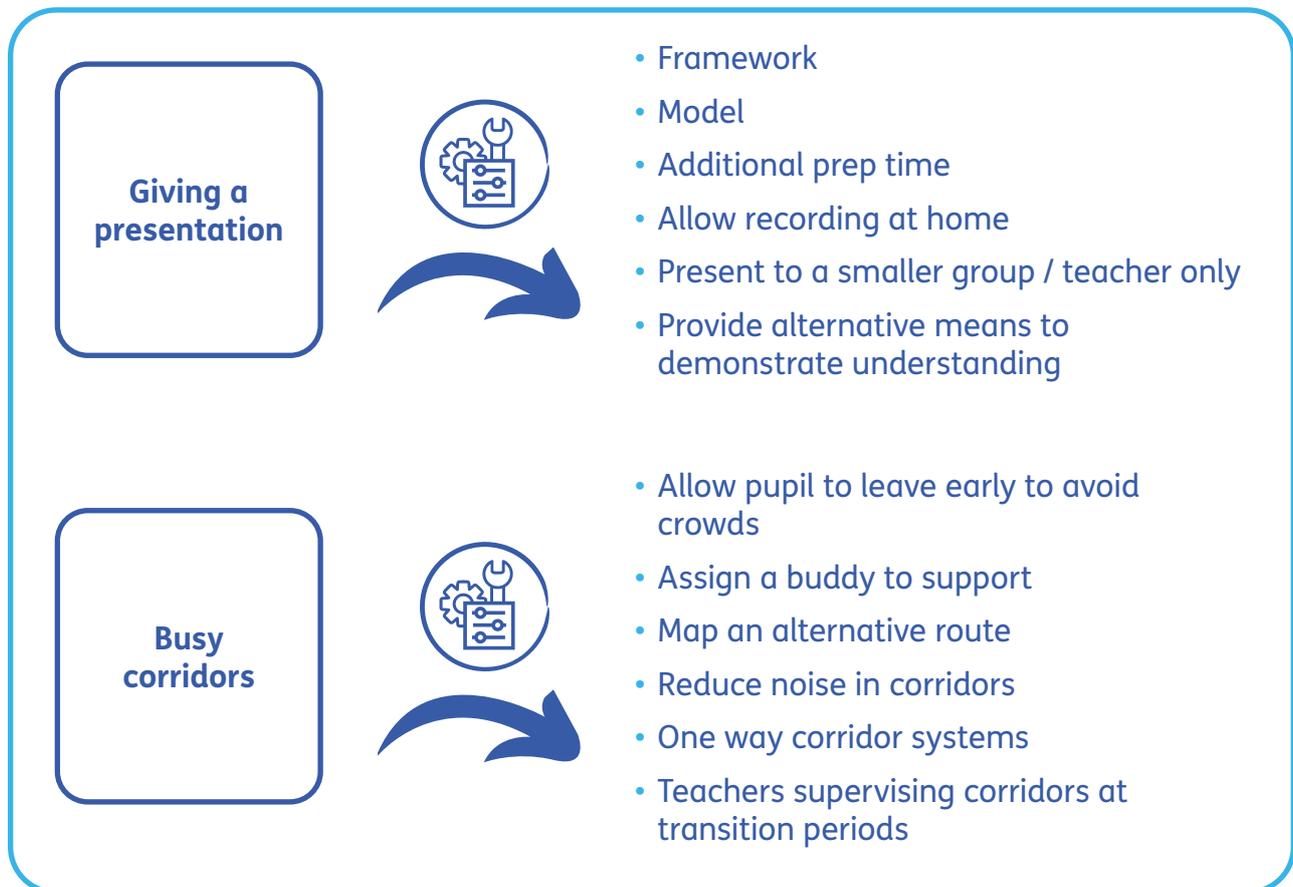
Section 4:

Why do Many Autistic Children and Young People Have Difficulties with Attending School?

The examples given by the Autistic Young Experts provide reasons for why the numbers for Anxious Non-Attendance are higher for autistic (and other neurodivergent) children and young people.

For several of the examples given by our Autistic Young Experts, **reasonable adjustments** could have addressed the causes of anxiety and supported the pupil in school.

For example:



There is more detail about reasonable adjustments and how these may help to support your child in our **How to Support** and **Toolkit of Resources** on this topic.



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Section 4:

Why do Many Autistic Children and Young People Have Difficulties with Attending School?

It is important that **reasonable adjustments** are put in place to support autistic children and young people in school. If these adjustments are not made, anxiety will increase and the child or young person may also go on to experience additional **autistic fatigue**:

'The term 'autistic fatigue' refers to the mental and physical exhaustion that autistic children, young people and adults experience when 'sensory overload' has occurred for a prolonged period of time.'

(Autistic Young Experts, AET Terminology Guide, 2024)

For many autistic children and young people, coping with anxiety triggers within the school environment can lead to what are sometimes called **meltdowns** (often seen once home in the safe space) and **'shutdowns'** or **'sensory overload'**.



A 'meltdown' is an outward 'loss of control' where an autistic person displays distressed behaviour due to them experiencing extreme overwhelm. These can include physical aggression and self-injurious behaviours. It is not a tantrum.



'Sensory overload' can happen when a person's senses become overwhelmed. Some autistic people describe sensory overload as a physical and mental response to sensory stimuli. It can lead to autistic shutdown (although is not the only cause of this).



A 'shutdown' is defined as an unavoidable partial or complete temporary withdrawal from any interaction or activity in which the person may not respond to communication and may be unable to move from the situation/environment that they are in.



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Section 4:

Why do Many Autistic Children and Young People Have Difficulties with Attending School?

I get tired from doing things that most people can do and use no energy - and this is a daily thing that causes things like needing more sleep or not being able to do as many things every day.

Autistic Young Expert

It is important to allow recovery time from autistic fatigue, both in school and at home.

Unfortunately, repeated increases in anxiety and the autistic fatigue that can result may lead to a number of negative consequences, which may impact the child or young person's wellbeing and education.



This is why it is important that schools, parents and any other involved professionals **work together**. By recognising, understanding and responding to autistic children and young people appropriately – **valuing their strengths and supporting them through reasonable adjustments** – negative consequences to their wellbeing and education can be avoided.



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Section 5:

Top Take Aways:



Top Five Takeaways:

There is a lot to think about when it comes to understanding the possible impacts of autism on Anxious Non-Attendance, so below are our *Top 5 Takeaways*:

1

Children and young people who are described as experiencing ANA / EBSA often have absences that are:

- **Prolonged**
- **Increasing over time**
- Following periods of **transition** (for example, from primary to secondary school, across key stages, or from Year 7 to Year 8).

2

ANA / EBSA is not necessarily **complete** absence from school - the child or young person may be attending school regularly, but **avoiding certain lessons** or being **frequently late**.

3

Anxiety is common generally but it is more common in autistic people than in neurotypical people.

4

Anxious Non-Attendance is **not a choice**.

5

Even if the anxiety is seen and felt at home, if it is a result of things that are happening in school, then the only way to support the child is for schools and families to work together.



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Section 6:

Now, why not Take the Next Steps?



Next, check out our guide on How to: Support Your Child with Anxious Non-Attendance.



Check out our **Toolkit of Resources** to Support Your Child with Anxious Non-Attendance, resources that will help you to support your child or young person more effectively.



Parent Resources



Where can I Find Further Support?

Anti-Bullying Alliance: <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/>

Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (IPSEA): <https://www.ipsea.org.uk/>

National Autistic Society: <https://www.autism.org.uk/>

Not Fine in School: <https://notfineinschool.co.uk/home>

SENDIAS: <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/>

YoungMinds: www.youngminds.org.uk



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