



# Do Autism and Anxiety Go Hand in Hand?

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## What is anxiety?

Imagine being chased by a lion in the savannah. In that scenario, feeling fear is completely normal. Your body enters “survival mode” to face the dangerous situation. At that moment, the brain triggers a physiological stress response, causing your breathing and heart rate to speed up. You react with “fight or flight” behavior.

Anxiety, on the other hand, occurs when your little internal alarm system goes off too often in response to situations that aren’t truly dangerous. Over time, the anticipation of danger or worry triggers a stress response that is no longer adaptive—this is anxiety.

## Are autistic children more anxious?

Autistic children sometimes react to objects or situations that might seem harmless to neurotypical individuals. For example, the texture of food or even being sung “Happy Birthday” can trigger a powerful stress response. Just like neurotypical children, the anticipation of such situations and the overactivation of their “alarm system” can lead to anxiety.

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health challenges in autistic children. According to scientific literature, **20% to 35% of autistic children aged**

**6 to 18 show signs of anxiety**, compared to 10% to 20% of neurotypical children. Several studies indicate that anxiety symptoms tend to be more intense in autistic children than in neurotypical children or in those with other neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD.

Recent studies show that anxiety can emerge very early in development, even before the age of 6. If not addressed early on, it often leads to academic, social, and adaptive functioning difficulties in school-aged children and adolescents. That’s why it’s so important to act early on the risk factors contributing to anxiety.

## How does anxiety manifest in autistic children?

Researchers have defined anxiety in school-aged autistic children in two main categories:

1. Common childhood anxiety
2. Autism-specific anxiety

Common childhood anxiety refers to anxiety symptoms as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, whereas autism-specific anxiety refers to anxiety symptoms that stem from autistic traits.

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### Main References:

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children—such as separation anxiety, worry, physical symptoms of anxiety, and specific fears.

However, autistic children tend to show more intolerance to uncertainty, generalized anxiety, and social anxiety than their neurotypical peers.

Second, certain autism-specific traits, such as sensory hypersensitivity and difficulty adapting to change, can contribute to anxiety in autistic children. Anxiety often arises when the child faces situations involving sensory discomfort, social situations, or changes in routine. These anxiety symptoms are often easily confused with autistic traits.

### Some Definitions...

- **Separation anxiety:** intense fear felt by children when separated from their parents
- **Physical symptoms of anxiety in children:** headaches, stomach aches, nausea, tension, difficulty concentrating, etc.
- **Specific fears:** fear or anxiety triggered by a specific object or situation (e.g., spiders, the dark)
- **Intolerance to uncertainty:** intense fear of unpredictable or uncertain future events
- **Generalized anxiety:** anxiety and excessive worry about everyday events or activities
- **Social anxiety:** intense fear linked to social situations or performance settings where the person might be observed by others

### What are the risk factors for anxiety in autistic children?

On one hand, studies show that sensory hypersensitivities and sleep difficulties increase cognitive overload in autistic children, which may contribute to the development of anxiety. Conversely, anxiety can also worsen sensory sensitivities and sleep problems.

On the other hand, difficulties in social communication can affect a child's ability to form relationships, which may lead to psychosocial distress and contribute to the development of generalized or social anxiety, for example.

Autistic children who also have ADHD are more likely to show signs of anxiety. Interestingly, some studies

have found that autistic children with above-average cognitive functioning or strong language skills tend to report more anxiety. However, it's important to note that autistic children with lower cognitive functioning may also experience anxiety, though their language challenges make it harder for them to express their needs and for others to recognize their symptoms.

### What are some intervention strategies?

Studies on anxiety treatment in verbal autistic children show that psychotherapy interventions—especially cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) strategies—are the most commonly used by professionals. CBT is based on the idea that our beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts influence our emotions and behaviors. The goal of therapy is to restructure thought patterns to reduce emotional distress.

Additionally, interventions that help children develop social skills in natural settings—real-life social interactions—can help reduce anxiety in autistic children. A better understanding of social situations allows the child to better predict social interactions, which in turn reduces their intolerance to uncertainty in social contexts.

Lastly, making daily life adjustments for the child can be beneficial if the sources of anxiety are properly identified. For example, the environment can be adapted to meet the child's sensory needs by dimming lights or reducing background noise.

### The Future of Research

Co-occurring anxiety and autism is a research field that deserves more attention, due to the specific ways anxiety presents in autistic children. Future research should focus on refining tools for assessing anxiety in autistic children to better match their developmental and language levels. It is also important to distinguish between autistic traits and anxiety symptoms in order to tailor interventions accordingly.

Finally, developing adapted screening tools that can be used by all professionals working with autistic children would support early detection of anxiety in young autistic children. 🌟