

# Summary of Research Findings

## Anxiety-related symptomatology in young children on the autism spectrum

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### Overview

- Most research doesn't consider anxiety in autism until children are aged 8 or over, but children aged 5-6 with autism are showing elevated scores on questionnaires which measure anxiety symptoms.
- There is an autism-specific measure of anxiety now available, but it may need tailoring to suit younger children with autism.
- It is important that research is conducted to determine if intervention in these younger children can prevent or protect against development of anxiety disorder as they grow older.

### Why did we do this study?

Research has found there are high rates of anxiety disorder among individuals on the autism spectrum but much of this research has focused on youth and adults. Little is known about early signs of anxiety in young children under the age of 8 years and yet early intervention at this point could help to prevent later anxiety disorders.

### What did we do?

#### Question asked

- Do parents report anxiety symptoms in children with autism who are 5-6 years old?
- Do the anxiety symptoms reported differ based on the child's level of ability?

#### What we did

- Parents completed an anxiety questionnaire as part of their annual questionnaire for the LASA study. This questionnaire has specifically designed to measure anxiety in autism and is called the ASC-ASD.
- We looked at the range of scores for each question and then look at the scores in relation to their categories (i.e. 5 items combine to look at separation anxiety and 5 for performance anxiety).

### What did we find?

- Parents most commonly reported anxiety symptoms that related to 'uncertainty'. In particular, two of the 'uncertainty' items ("*My child worries if they don't know what will happen next*" and "*My child always needs to be prepared before things happen*") were rated as occurring often or always in over half the sample.
- The child's level of ability (adaptive behaviour) did make a difference to some of the anxiety symptoms reported, so parents of children of differing abilities may need to consider different symptoms.

### What does this mean?

- Boys and girls on the autism spectrum may be equally likely to experience anxiety. This result is interesting because in children who are not on the autism spectrum, girls are more likely to have a diagnosis of anxiety than boys. So, it is possible that the symptoms of anxiety are different for children on the autism spectrum compared to children who are not on the autism spectrum.
- It is important to consider the individual child's characteristics and environment when supporting children on the autism spectrum who also experience anxiety.

### Where are we sharing this study?

This research has been published in the journal *Autism: International Journal of Research and Practice* and is available by putting "[doi: 10.1177/1362361317734692](https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361317734692)" into google.