

Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Students



In the U.S., approximately 2% of youth have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Mental health challenges are more common among autistic youth. This infographic displays how anxiety, a common mental health challenge for autistic youth, interferes with school participation, as well as evidence-based practices to support anxiety symptoms.

How does anxiety get in the way of learning and school participation for autistic students?



Attendance

Students may be tardy to school or avoid attending school



Classroom Engagement

Students may shut down (e.g., head on desk) or avoid participating in class



Friendships and Peer Interactions

Students may have a hard time making friends



Extracurricular Participation

Students may not join or participate in extracurricular activities^{1,2}

Given these difficulties, it is important to provide autistic students with evidence-based practices for anxiety that can be used in schools. For autistic students, intervention programs rooted in **cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)** can help reduce anxiety symptoms within school settings.³ These programs may also help autistic students meaningfully in other ways, including:

- Increasing classroom engagement⁴
- Increasing participation in extracurricular activities⁴

Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Students

How can effective mental health services, such as CBT, be delivered in schools to autistic students?



Among autistic students eligible for support under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mental health services can be delivered as part of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).³⁻⁵



Mental health services can be delivered in both individual (e.g., one-on-one) and small group formats.^{3,5}



Interdisciplinary school providers, such as special education teachers and speech language pathologists, can be trained to effectively deliver mental health programs (including CBT).^{3,4}



Using interdisciplinary providers to deliver these programs may alleviate the burden on mental health staff.^{3,4}

Click the links below for more information about related topics

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Read the Southeast MHTTC report "*Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to Support the Mental Health of Autistic Students: An Overview*" here: <https://bit.ly/3Pd9kgH>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

View the Southeast MHTTC document "*Using IDEA to Fund School-Based Mental Health Services*" here: <bit.ly/3x1sTkR>

Strategies to Support Anxiety in Autistic Students

Watch the Southeast MHTTC webinar "*Supporting the Mental Health of Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*" here: <bit.ly/3MkSoni>

References

1. Adams, D., & Emerson, L. M. (2021). The impact of anxiety in children on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 51(6), 1909-1920.
2. Reyes, N. M., Pickard, K., Tanda, T., Morris, M. A., & Reaven, J. (2021). Identifying and understanding anxiety in youth with ASD: Parent and school provider perspectives on anxiety within public school settings. *Evidence-Based Practice in Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 1-12.
3. Reaven, J., Meyer, A. T., Pickard, K., Boles, R. E., Hayutin, L., Middleton, C., ... & Blakeley-Smith, A. (2022). Increasing access and reach: Implementing school-based CBT for anxiety in students with ASD or suspected ASD. *Evidence-Based Practice in Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 7(1), 56-75.
4. Pickard, K., Meyer, A., Reyes, N., Tanda, T., & Reaven, J. (2021). Using evaluative frameworks to examine the implementation outcomes of a cognitive behavioral therapy program for autistic students with anxiety within public school settings. *Autism*, 13623613211065797.
5. Reaven, J., Reyes, N., Pickard, K., Tanda, T., & Morris, M. A. (2020). Addressing the needs of diverse youth with ASD and anxiety in public schools: Stakeholder input on adaptations of clinic-based facing your fears. *School Mental Health*, 1-15.