

Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Students: An Overview of Resources Available through the Southeast Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC)



In the U.S., approximately 2% of school-age children are autistic.¹ Autistic students are much more likely than non-autistic students to experience mental health challenges, including difficulty with emotion regulation, anxiety, and depression that may be exacerbated by experiences of bullying, victimization, and segregation within schools. There is an urgent need to support the mental and behavioral health of autistic students.

Over the past two years, the Southeast MHTTC team has disseminated resources related to identifying and supporting common mental health challenges in autistic students, including *anxiety* and *executive function*. This report provides an overview of these resources in the following topic areas:

1. Anxiety (p. 2)

- Supporting the Mental Health of Students with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities
- Infographics and Reports

2. Executive Function (p. 3)

- Understanding and Supporting the Executive Functioning of Autistic Students
- Strategies to Support Executive Function in Autistic Students: Infographic Series
- Supporting the Executive Function of Autistic Students in the Classroom: Your Questions Answered

3. Disruptive Behaviors (p. 4)

- Understanding and Supporting the Behavior of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Resources to Support Autistic Students with Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the most common co-occurring mental health challenges for autistic youth, with as many as 50 percent of autistic youth experiencing clinically significant anxiety.^{2,3} It is important for school leaders to implement systems that support addressing anxiety symptoms in autistic and neurodivergent students. In the absence of these supports, anxiety symptoms may manifest as school refusal (resulting in absences or tardies), trips to the nurse's office, disruptive behavior and potentially excessive disciplinary action, and reduced classroom and extra-curricular participation.^{4,5}

Supporting the Mental Health of Students with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities

A September 2021 Southeast MHTTC webinar series provided more information on anxiety symptoms for autistic students. *Part I* focused on identifying common anxiety symptoms as they manifest in schools. *Part II* covered what is considered a "best practice" in supporting anxiety symptoms in autistic students. This webinar provided an overview of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which is considered a gold standard in the treatment of anxiety symptoms in autistic youth. CBT has been adapted for delivery by educators within public school systems.

Infographics and Reports

The Southeast MHTTC has also produced a series of infographics summarizing this webinar content, including infographics describing how to recognize common anxiety symptoms in autistic students (*Identifying Anxiety in Autistic Students: Common Symptoms and Considerations*) and discussing how anxiety interferes with academic and extracurricular participation (*Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Students*). A two-page report (*Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to Support the Mental Health of Autistic Students: An Overview*) then gave a more detailed description of the core strategies included in CBT for anxious autistic youth and common ways that CBT has been delivered within schools.

The collage features three main documents:

- Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Students:** An infographic detailing how anxiety interferes with school participation. It lists four areas: Attendance (students may be tardy or avoid attending), Classroom Engagement (students may shut down or avoid participating), Friendships and Peer Interactions (students may have difficulty making friends), and Extracurricular Participation (students may avoid participating in clubs). It also notes that mental health challenges are more common among autistic youth and that evidence-based practices can support anxiety symptoms.
- Identifying Anxiety in Autistic Students: Common Symptoms and Considerations:** An infographic listing common types of anxiety such as Specific Fears (bugs, doctors, heights), Separation Anxieties (worry about being away from caregiver), Social Fears (worry about others' thoughts), Chronic Worry (worry about performance), and Unique types like phobias, OCD, and Tourette's. It also mentions Sensory Overstimulation and difficulty engaging in specific games.
- Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to Support the Mental Health of Autistic Students:** A report by Katherine Pickard, Erin Wolford, and Janet Cummings. It discusses best practices for supporting the mental health of autistic students, emphasizing CBT as a gold standard. It notes that CBT programs explicitly created for autistic youth show significant reductions in anxiety symptoms compared to school-based programs. The report also includes a section on the evidence for CBT in school settings, stating that research has shown significant improvements in anxiety symptoms when receiving CBT in school versus other school-based mental health services.

Supporting Autistic Students in the Classroom with Anxiety: Your Questions Answered

Given the continued demand for information related to anxiety in autistic students, a February 2024 Southeast MHTTC two-part webinar series structured as “office hours” provided information on the topic. *Part I* provided an overview of anxiety identification followed by review of two case study presentations. *Part II* provided a brief overview of evidence-based strategies to support anxiety in autistic youth, and included discussion of how these strategies could be applied within two case studies.

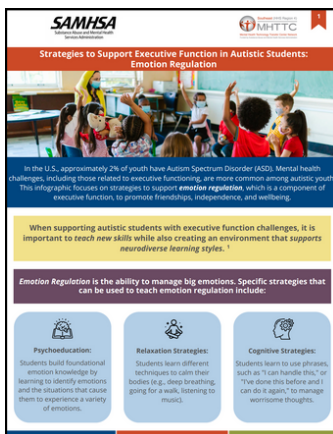
Resources to Support Executive Function Differences in Autistic Students

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is the most common co-occurring diagnosis for autistic youth.³ However, the substantial overlap between autism and ADHD⁶ can pose challenges in identifying and supporting autistic and neurodivergent students. Autistic students, students with ADHD, and autistic students with co-occurring ADHD likely need support for executive function differences. The Southeast MHTTC team has provided guidance related to identifying and supporting executive function differences in autistic students.

Understanding and Supporting the Executive Functioning of Autistic Students

A February 2023 Southeast MHTTC two-part webinar series provided information regarding how to identify and support executive functioning challenges in autistic students and students with ADHD. *Part I* focused on identifying common executive function differences in autistic students. *Part II* provided an overview of evidence-based approaches that can be used to support the executive functioning of autistic students.

Strategies to Support Executive Function in Autistic Students: Infographic Series



To expand discussion of executive function and its complex and multi-faceted nature,⁷ the Southeast MHTTC prepared a series of infographics devoted to breaking down strategies to support various aspects of executive function in autistic students. These infographics covered strategies to support *flexibility*, *planning*, *emotion regulation*, and *inhibition*. Each infographic lists common, evidence-based approaches and, importantly, highlights the significant role of academic environments in exacerbating executive function challenges when they are not equipped to support and accommodate the learning needs of autistic and neurodivergent students.

Supporting the Executive Function of Autistic Students in the Classroom: Your Questions Answered

As with the content focused on anxiety, a September 2023 Southeast MHTTC two-part webinar series on executive function structured as “office hours” addressed supporting executive function in autistic students. *Part I* provided an overview and case study-based discussion of how to identify executive function differences. *Part II* provided an overview on strategies to support executive function.

Resources to Support Autistic Students Demonstrating Disruptive Behaviors

A Spring 2022 Southeast MHTTC webinar discussed strategies to identify and support autistic youth who also demonstrate disruptive behaviors, such as elopement, verbal or physical aggression, and self-injury at school.

Understanding and Supporting the Behavior of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

This webinar provided attendees with a framework for identifying why a behavior might be occurring and environmental strategies (e.g., the use of visual schedules and routines) to help autistic students learn and understand their routines and expectations. This webinar highlighted the importance of noting that disruptive behaviors are often misperceived as “naughty” even when they may reflect the need for underlying mental health or emotion regulation support.⁵ Thus, it is important to consider whether an autistic child’s mental health may be the reason for their aggression, elopement, or self-injury.



References

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