

Queensmill School

Policy guidance on strategies to reduce pupils' stress

“A caring environment where we respect and value children for what they are, help them to understand the world around them and teach them the skills to manage their autistic behaviours.”

At Queensmill School we ensure that we have a supportive relationship with each of our pupils and that we learn how to recognise their signs of stress. We are therefore able to assess how we intervene to help them to reduce their stress. As part of this we are able to identify behaviours that show us that the child is becoming stressed. We then identify the phase of stress and therefore the intervention that we will need to put in place in order to calm the child.

From close knowledge of each of our children, and from reading accounts of adults with autism, we know that people with autism are easily stressed and at times frightened. They are likely to show strong reactions to their environment, and they are likely to have difficulty managing their emotions when they are upset. Temple Grandin (1995) described herself as living in a constant state of fear with things that would seem minor to others causing her huge stress.

To enhance our ability to manage and avoid childrens' stress and to develop the ability of children to manage their own stress, the school will use the SCERTS framework and methodology (**s**ocial **c**ommunication, **e**motional **r**egulation, **t**ransactional **s**upports to inform our practice. With particular reference to emotional regulation, we will accurately record as an integral part of our assessment data, the progress children make in self and mutual regulation.

We recognise that those things that are most likely to cause stress to our pupils are related to sensory issues, learning tasks or social events such as:

1. Physical problems: pain or discomfort. Self-injury, head-banging, biting or slapping can be signs of pain, discomfort or illness.
2. Sensory overload: noise, lights, texture of clothes, crowding, movement during any transition times, smells, visual distractions, etc.
3. A missing piece of information: child may misinterpret or misunderstand something but cannot ask for help in understanding.
4. The behaviour of other people: eye contact, too much talk, level of voices or of laughter, smell of other people, getting too close, etc.
5. Change: all transition times, or when something familiar is not there or is different.

6. Boredom and waiting: our pupils may not know what to do whilst waiting, do not know how long they may have to wait, nor what may happen next.

Unlike typically developing children, when children with autism experience stress as described above, they seem to have difficulty in returning from that stress and regaining a feeling of calmness or alertness or focused attention. This failure, it is suggested by Whitman, 2004, could be attributed to their inability to develop and/or use effective calming or alerting strategies such as:

- self-soothing or calming strategies
- cognitive/problem-solving strategies
- social strategies – ie seeking comfort/support/help from others

as neurotypical children learn to do.

The strategies for stress reduction that we practice at Queensmill School are:

1. Organisation and structure and understanding the events of the day

At Queensmill School we provide an organised, low-distraction and predictable environment that can compensate for the processing difficulties experiences by our children, which helps them to stay calm. These are:

- a. physical space:
 - organised environment to reduce perceptual and motor difficulties of children with autism – clear visual delineation of the classes, as described by TEACCH, with individual work stations, group work areas and social areas
 - an environment which communicates the expectations of the school day, (TEACCH) – individual timetables, box work that is set up so that individual pupils can understand what is asked of them and work independently, now/later boards, I am working for boards, choice boards, feelings boards, etc.
 - reduction of sensory stresses – classrooms have to hand things such as ear defenders, hug jackets, etc for pupils to choose when they are feeling stressed, or for staff to offer to children when they see the first signs of sensory overload. This work is overseen by our Occupational Therapist, who writes sensory profiles and programmes which are then carried out by classroom staff, either in classes, the sensory room, the sensory integration room or outside in the playground.

2. Offering an accessible, relevant, motivating and challenging curriculum

"If a reinforcing event occurs immediately as a direct result of effort and action, it is more likely that the same effort and action will be repeated and strengthened."
Skinner, 1953

The teaching of functional communication is our highest priority alongside the strategies used to reduce anxiety. Whilst we recognise that improved communication will in itself reduce anxiety, we also know that children need to be as calm as possible to learn and that therefore we need to understand them and know how to help them to become calm so that they are in a good position to learn.

Our English/communication curriculum is led by a senior teacher and by our speech and language therapists who work largely through communication groups in the classrooms. We use Picture Exchange Communication System as our major tool in teaching communication skills as well as Intensive Interaction for some pupils.

At Queensmill we are constantly checking to ensure that we know the most motivating activities and reinforcers (toys/activities that our pupils like to play with) for each individual child. These are noted on a whiteboard in each classroom.

We are aware that good learning or behaviour should be reinforced immediately (see Skinner above and also Team Teach Manual page 30) and also that if an activity that the child likes immediately follows something they like less then it is more likely that they will engage in the less preferred activity, and even come to like it a little more because it is followed by something that they love. For these reasons, we use the following strategies:

- now/later boards
- I am working for boards
- immediate reinforcement of good PECS use
- incorporation of the child's special interest into the curriculum
- visual presentation of the curriculum
- multi-sensory presentation of the curriculum
- learning in a variety of contexts to encourage generalisation
- learning of life-skills, independence skills, social skills
- links with and frequent trips into the community to help to generalise learning

3. Teaching new skills

One of the major strategies for reducing stress and preventing anxiety-related problems occurring at Queensmill is to teach new skills in order for our pupils to have more choice and control over their lives. These include:

- functional academic skills
- self-monitoring and relaxation skills
- functional communication skills
- problem-solving skills
- choice making skills
- social skills
- self-help/life skills

Learning is most effective when the child's anxiety/stress levels are at their lowest. Whilst we use behavioural analysis to design ways of teaching skills, we also reinforce and generalise those learned skills in other areas of the school and the curriculum, including outside of the school in the community.

The steps used to teach a new skill or routine leading to the completion of a skill are:

- a. Learning objective – what we intend to teach
- b. Breakdown of sequence of steps to lead to the learning objective
- c. Preparation of materials, visual cues and reinforcers needed to teach the objective.
- d. Process for introducing the new routine leading to the learning objective.
- e. Monitoring and charting progress in learning.
- f. Opportunities for the child to carry out the new routine in varying settings in order to generalise the knowledge. We are aware that many of our children are motivated by repetition of familiar routines, and we can therefore use this to reinforce the child's learning in a variety of contexts.

Once a pupil is familiar with the routine it can appear on their schedule in a variety of locations. Physical prompts (pointing, guiding, blocking) or verbal prompts ("Let's try that again") are used to prevent mistakes, and then as the pupil becomes familiar with the routine without mistakes, prompts are withdrawn in order to increase independence.

4. Levels of stress

The four stages of stress, in which we see stress at low, medium or high levels, are:

Stage 1: Escalation

Intensity of stress:	Behaviour:	Intervention goals:
Medium	Increased agitation	Solve problem Use diversion Defuse stress Try to teach the child how to remain calm in a similar situation

Stage 2: Crisis

Intensity of stress:	Behaviour:	Intervention goals:
High	High tension, highly vulnerable Out of control, panic-reflexive, unthinking	Solve the problem quickly Keep people safe Support child's de-escalation of stress and relaxation

Stage 3: De-Escalation

Intensity of stress:	Behaviour:	Intervention goals:
Medium/Low	Increasingly calm but	Support and reinforce

	highly vulnerable to re-escalation Tired	relaxation and self-control Re-engage in productive activity
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Stage 4: Back to normal

Intensity of stress:	Behaviour:	Intervention goals:
Low/Normal	Stable Under control	Evaluate and change situation to prevent re-occurrence Organise and structure to ensure all are aware of expectations Teach new skills

5. Strategies used at Queensmill to help to de-escalate stress

Despite the carefully organised environment, curriculum and teaching strategies described in 1 – 3 above, pupils may still become stressed. When staff notice the signs of stress in a child they will decide to use one of the following strategies:

- a. Prevent a crisis:
 - reduce demands and pressures
 - do not get close or ask for eye contact
 - remain calm
 - ignore the behaviour but acknowledge the child's problems – eg: "you are tired and you want a break"
 - help the child to do what they need to do to calm themselves – eg: "go to your quiet space", or, ""let's go for a run"
 - use whatever means of communication the child needs to understand this
 - if it works, praise quietly – e.g. "good, you are sitting in your quiet space, you can relax"

- b. Continuing the activity with more support for the child:
 - if the child is becoming stressed, but is not yet at crisis level, staff can keep the activity going but offer more visual support, or more physical prompts so the child understands better what they need to do and will calm

- c. Use the problem to teach or reinforce new skills
 - acknowledge the problem
 - help the child to choose their solution – e.g. If the child is getting stressed and pulling towards the door we might say "you want to go outside to calm down", so that the child is learning their own self-calming techniques.

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Reviewed by*F Adu*.....

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