

Anxiety

Anxiety in Kids with Autism

The infographic is titled "Anxiety in Kids with Autism" and is set against a light pink background. It contains six key points, each with a blue icon and a text box. The points are arranged in a 3x2 grid, separated by horizontal lines. The icons are: a stethoscope, two speech bubbles, a stomach, a hand with a finger pointing, two people, and two pills.

-  Talk to your doctor or health care provider if you think your child might be dealing with anxiety.
-  Doctors should interview both the parent and child during check-ups to gather more information about the anxiety symptoms.
-  Some kids with autism and anxiety also have stomach and digestive problems.
-  Some kids with autism and anxiety are extra sensitive to touch, tastes, smells, and sounds.
-  Different types of therapy, like cognitive behavioral therapy, can help with anxiety symptoms in kids with autism.
-  Medications often help with anxiety symptoms too. As with any medication, it is important to watch carefully for any negative side effects.

Kids and teens with autism might be more likely to feel anxious¹. Anxiety is feelings of fear, worry, stress, nervousness, or panic. These feelings might happen when thinking about the future, or could come up at seemingly random moments. Anxiety can be shown through thoughts, physical feelings, and behaviors. To make sure that a child's anxiety is seen and treated, doctors and nurses should talk to both the parents and the child². Kids with ASD and anxiety might also have digestive issues like stomach pain, diarrhea, constipation, and nausea^{3;4}. Kids with digestive problems and stomach pain have more anxiety symptoms and may be more sensitive to sights and sounds around them^{3;4}. This means that digestive issues, sensory problems, and anxiety may go together in children and teens with autism^{3;4}.

While medications helped reduce some anxiety symptoms for children with autism, negative side effects were common and led some families to stop using the medications⁵. Doctors should be aware of how anxiety medications may cause some children to be in a bad mood, as well as cause other problems in children with autism⁵.

Behavioral treatments such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, a type of talk-therapy, help some kids with ASD with their anxiety⁵. Doctors can think about other treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, when they are deciding the safest way to treat anxiety in kids who also have ASD⁵.

**Disclaimer: This summary is based on research conducted by Autism Treatment Network (ATN) members. It is not a summary of the entire body of research literature available on this subject*

Frequently Asked Questions

1. WHAT HAPPENS TO THE CHILD/TEENAGER?

- Many can be physically aggressive – hitting, kicking, biting, etc.
- Others can be hyperactive, anxious, worried, or hurt themselves³

2. WHEN DO WE SEE THIS HAPPENING?

Behavior problems happen more often:

- If the child or teen has trouble sleeping or communicating^{1,2,3,4}
- Younger kids are more likely to hurt others
- Older kids and teens are more likely to hurt themselves, especially if they have weak language skills^{3,4}

3. WHAT CAN HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS OFFER?

Medications that can help children or teenagers with behavioral issues:

- Risperidone
- Aripiprazole

4. WHAT SIDE EFFECTS ARE THERE?

- Risperidone and Aripiprazole are good at making kids and teens less irritable (less tantrums and meltdowns) and aggressive.
- Other drugs may also help with behavior problems and have fewer side effects⁵
- Medications that help kids and teens with behavior problems often make them gain weight
- Metformin can help kids and teens stay at a healthy weight⁷

5. WHAT SHOULD PARENTS DO?

- Talk with your health care provider or therapist to learn about behavior issues.
- If you are not sure, ask them what to look for. What information do they need from you to help your child/teen with their behavior problems?
- Talk with your health care provider to learn about what medications can help with behavior issues and what side effects are common.

Take your findings to your next appointment. All children and teens with ASD should be checked for behavior problems. Health care providers may prescribe medications to help children and teens with autism feel less irritable and be less aggressive⁵. Treatments that help with behavior problems may help the whole family feel better⁶.

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References

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3. Mazurek, M., Vasa, R., Kalb, L., Kanne, S., Rosenberg, D., Keefer, A., Murray, D., Freedman, B. and Lowery, L. (2012). Anxiety, Sensory Over-Responsivity, and Gastrointestinal Problems in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 41(1), pp.165-176. <http://asatn.org/node/122>

4. Mazurek, M., Keefer, A., Shui, A. and Vasa, R. (2014). One-year course and predictors of abdominal pain in children with autism spectrum disorders: The role of anxiety and sensory over-responsivity. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 8(11), pp.1508-1515. <http://asatn.org/node/1423>

5. Vasa, R., Carroll, L., Nozzolillo, A., Mahajan, R., Mazurek, M., Bennett, A., Wink, L. and Bernal, M. (2014). A Systematic Review of Treatments for Anxiety in Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(12), pp.3215-3229. <http://asatn.org/node/1421>