



INFORMATION SHEET

Age Group: **Children / Adolescents and Young Adults**

Sheet Title: **Anger Management**

There are many sources of stress for children and adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome. Some will react to this by becoming anxious, some by feeling depressed, while others become angry, and rage against the frustrating incidents in their day. Some individuals internalise their feelings and tend to blame others when things go wrong. Those who externalise their feelings have great difficulty in controlling their temper.

There may be no particular rationalisation or focus – just an aggressive mood or an excessive reaction to frustration or provocation. The provocation can be deliberate teasing by other children, or being “set up” as a form of live theatre enjoyed by the children who do not get into trouble.

Children with Asperger's Syndrome seem to evoke either the maternal or the predatory instinct in others.

Children with this syndrome often lack subtlety in retaliating. Other children would wait for an appropriate moment to respond without being caught.

The child with Asperger's Syndrome can also lack sufficient empathy and self-control to moderate the degree of injury. They are in a blind fury that gets them into trouble. The teacher sees the child being aggressive and may not be aware of the taunts that precipitated the anger.

It is useful to use strategies to help the child understand the nature and expression of specific feelings, particularly anger. (see strategies page).

It is also useful to encourage self-control, and to teach the child to consider alternative options.



Self-control can be strengthened by the traditional approaches of stopping and counting to ten, taking a deep breath and reminding oneself to keep calm.

Specific relaxation techniques can be practised, and the child taught cues when they must calm down and relax.

It is also important to explain the alternative option to hitting the other person. The child can use words, not actions, to express their anger, or walk away, ask the other person to leave them alone, or seek an adult for help or to be a referee.

The level of stress that the child with Asperger's Syndrome has been feeling may have been increasing for some time, and one incident can become the trigger that releases feelings that have long been suppressed.

The angry moment can leave the child relieved at having discharged their stress in one brief episode. Thus the behaviour becomes negatively reinforced. It helps end an unpleasant feeling. When the incident is over, the child with Asperger's Syndrome can be visibly relaxed, but confused as to why everyone else continues to be so distressed.

There are strategies to consider if the anger becomes very bad:

- o Construct a list of signs that indicate the rising of stress levels (bombastic gestures, rigid thinking, rude words, etc)
- o Draw the person's attention to this list.
- o Construct a "menu" of activities to reduce levels of stress (listening to music, close eyes and imagine a relaxing scene, a massage, a soothing bath, lots of reassurance and compliments).

Sometimes these can help. The question "what's the matter" can make things worse, as the child may have difficulty in explaining the causes of their increasing anger. It is good to learn when it is tactful not to ask, and to divert the attention away from the causes, to more pleasant things.

Should the agitation become greater, a strategy is to "burn up" the tension and anguish with a rigorous physical activity, like going for a run or cycle ride.



Activities that involve “creative destruction” can be particularly effective. If the child with Asperger’s Syndrome feels better after they have damaged or destroyed something, then ensure this becomes a productive activity – like crushing cans or cardboard boxes for recycling, or tearing up old clothing to make rags.

These are general strategies to reduce and channel aggression into constructive activities. What can be done in response to a specific incident?

Firstly, to become equally angry just inflames the situation. Try to remain calm and rational – a model of what the child should be doing.

If the angry child will tolerate a discussion of why they are so angry, try to discover the cause. If it is an anger provoked by the actions of another, getting an apology (sometimes from both parties) can help.

It is important to explain to the child what to do should the situation arise again, with instructions to tell an adult of the provoking activity or comments.

It is essential that the child with Asperger’s Syndrome learns alternative (preferably verbal) ways of dealing with the situation.

For older children with Asperger’s Syndrome, Comic Strip Conversations by Carol Gray can be used. A story-board approach is used, with a frame for each stage in the sequence of events. These are discussed and the incident is used as an opportunity to learn the perspective of others, and to consider alternative actions and solutions.

Most children with Asperger’s Syndrome will respond well if a situation is explained visually rather than verbally. In practical terms, this means using drawing materials (pens, paper, computers, paints, chalkboards, whiteboards) to illustrate the situation and to understand what happened.

Consequences of actions need to be discussed, and having Asperger’s Syndrome is not a licence to behave irresponsibly. It is, however, important for all the information and perspectives to be available before appropriate consequences are considered.