

RESEARCH UPDATE:

THE LADDERS PROJECT: PARENT-LED ANXIETY REDUCTION PACKAGE FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN WHO USE FEW OR NO WORDS

Anxiety is known to impact many autistic children who use few or no words. Despite the prevalence of anxiety, there is a lack of evidence-based individualised support packages that are suitable for these individuals.

Autistic children and their families should not be denied the opportunity to develop personalised strategies to help reduce anxiety during frequently encountered activities and situations. Therefore, this research study has been developed with input from parents of autistic children who use few or no words and focuses on the delivery of a 16-week package of support to reduce child anxiety and increase quality of life.

The support package will focus on areas of a child's life where they are at risk of missing out on everyday opportunities or experiences because of anxiety. We are aware of concerns within the autism community around the use of interventions to change behaviours that do not impact the autistic person's life, or are intended to change behaviours that are differences rather than difficulties. Care will be taken to ensure anxiety is the target of the support package rather than the immediate distress typically experienced by autistic people due to sensory/other differences, using observations, diaries, parent/carer reports and outcome measures to confirm this. What we will learn from the research study will help us develop evidence-based practice guidance for mental health services supporting autistic children who speak few or no words. The intervention has been developed by the research team led by Dr Jane Waite, a Clinical Psychologist, with mental health services in mind.

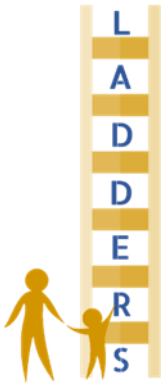
What does the research involve?

Families will complete 16 weekly video/telephone support sessions; these involve an assessment and formulation (individualising the support package to the child's specific needs), before parents use the tailored strategies learned to gradually support their child to reduce anxiety in everyday situations. There will be a period of assessment before the support package starts, which will take between 2-3 weeks, and there will also be a follow-up session 8 weeks after the package has finished. This follow-up will allow us to see if the support is effective for families long term.

We hope to deliver the package through a mix of face-to-face sessions and video calls; however, we are aware that some families may be concerned about the risk of COVID-19. We can discuss ways we can be flexible to each families' needs. **We are recruiting parents and children now, to start the package of support between November 2021 and January 2022.**

What has happened so far?

This support package is the final stage of a project that has explored anxiety in autistic children who speak few or no words. As the support package has been developed, we have completed focus groups with parents of autistic children, and autistic parents, to gain feedback and advice about the content of the support package. It is hoped that the project will be completed by September 2023.



Other important information

If you think you may be interested in taking part in this research project, or if you would like any further information then please contact Dr Jane Waite at j.waite@aston.ac.uk or 0121 204 4307. This research project is funded by Autistica.

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