



"Different Behaviour Between School and Home & Elsewhere Phenomenon in Autism"

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The only reason some autistic children release the bulk of their challenging behaviour at home, is because that is where they feel safe to do so, with the people they feel safest with. This means, they **do not** feel safe to do so elsewhere such as school or nursery, or even in a clinical assessment environment and often anxiety is the thing that makes them hold it in or mask it, whilst in those places.

What do Official Sources Say?

The National Autistic Society (NAS) is considered the UK's leading autism charity. Here is their webpage about the issue:

<http://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/common-questions/school-home.aspx>

"Different behaviour between school and home"

"Q. My son behaves differently at home and at school. School say they do not have any behavioural difficulties with him, but at home it is a different matter.

A. This is quite a common scenario we hear about on the Helpline, which Tony Attwood refers to as the Jekyll and Hyde character (Attwood, 1998).

There may be a number of reasons for this difference in behaviour. Just because the behaviour occurs at home, it does not necessarily mean the trigger (or the cause) lies there. Your son may find school very stressful, but keeps his emotions locked up until he gets home. Most children with autism do not display the body language and facial expressions you would expect to see when a child is feeling a certain way. Whilst your son may appear relatively calm at school, he may be experiencing very different emotions beneath the surface. Asking a child with autism how they feel may not get the correct response as some children can find spoken communication very difficult and struggle to explain their emotions to someone."

"Behavior Problems At Home - But Not At School"

<http://www.myaspergerschild.com/2012/04/behavior-problems-at-home-but-not-at.html>

Sadly this submission by the NAS to Parliament in 2010 does not seem to have resulted in any cultural change in schools and among professionals towards autistic children!

"Behaviour and Discipline in Schools

Involving parents

42. An inquiry conducted by Brian Lamb found that parents of children with SEN do not feel involved enough in the process of their child's education, or handling their challenging behaviour. Parents reported that the professionals did not appear to take their opinions and observations into account. [20] It is particularly important to listen to parent as the difficulties a child is facing may not always be apparent at school - parents often describe the "three o'clock timebomb" where their child comes home from school and explodes with the frustrations of having to cope in a neuro-typical environment of school all day.

"There needs to be less leaping to conclusions about parenting skills, especially regarding behaviour". [21]

43. By working with, and listening to parents it is possible to maintain consistency of approach between home and school, in order that children are able to apply their learning across different environments and to avoid them becoming confused."

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmeduc/writev/behaviour/we65.htm>

A leading academic who studies and writes about autism behaviours, Dr Luke Beardon, has this to say:

"Good' behaviour at school – not so good at home?

Regarding autism and whether it is possible for children to display different behaviours at home compared to school – this is something that over the years probably hundreds of parents have asked me about. So often the message is a similar (and familiar) one – that at school the child 'behaves' well, while at home things can get... well, kinda out of hand! This results in huge frustration for parents who cannot seem to get school to accept that behaviour at home is so different to that at school, with school insisting that 'everything must be ok'

It is very clearly documented (by parents and professionals, as well as organisations such as the NAS) that many children with autism (though not all) will display considerably different behaviours in different settings. This can be as a result of a wide range of reasons, from central coherence abilities, to environmental factors, to differing levels of stress in different situations. A reasonably common pattern in terms of school/home behaviour is that the child may appear to present with no problems at school, but at home there can be major issues in terms of behaviour. Often, the result is that either school simply do not believe that the child they see at school can be displaying the reported behaviours at home, or that school erroneously believe that because the behaviours are only seen at home then the causing factors for the behaviour must also be situated there. This is not always the case, and it is of imperative importance that all parties involved recognise the serious nature of high levels of distress, and recognise that all aspects of the individual's life may be a contributory factor towards high arousal – which, in turn, may manifest in behavioural issues.

https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/autism/2014/11/18/good-behaviour-at-school-not-so-good-at-home/?doing_wp_cron=1467120845.3582270145416259765625

Children with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), a specific autism subtype which is driven by anxiety, may be even more likely to hold it in at school:

About PDA - Other related characteristics

Severe behavioural difficulties

A large proportion of, but not all, people with PDA can have real problems controlling their temper. As children, this can take the form of prolonged tantrums and violent outbursts, as well as less dramatic avoidance strategies like distraction, giving excuses etc. It is essential to see these outbursts as extreme anxiety or 'panic attacks' and to treat them as such, with reassurance, calming strategies and de-escalation techniques.

Sometimes a child with PDA can appear very anxious at home but remain relatively passive at school (a learnt coping strategy). In situations like this, parents are likely to feel very isolated and inadequate.

<http://www.pdasociety.org.uk/what-is-PDA/about-pda/other-related-characteristics>

"Educational and Handling Guidelines for Children with Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome"

Many PDA children learn compliance and tolerance at school, but then behave much worse at home, as if they cannot keep up the compliance for more than a few hours. It is important to realise that this is not to do with less competent handling at home, and much more to do with the limits of the child's tolerance and the need to 'let their hair down' somewhere; if not understood, this can cause great tension between parents and teachers. This reaction when the child is released from school is so common in PDA that parents need to be reassured that it is not their fault, and that it is most unlikely that children with these problems will ever show equal compliance in all their environments."

<http://www.pdasociety.org.uk/education/educational-and-handling-guidelines>

It may be even more common in autistic females especially, to mask in school, they tend to be more passive and compliant and internalise their difficulties more than autistic males.

The Human Cost

When schools and professionals do not believe parents, this is at great detriment to the child at the heart of the issue:

"The "hidden disability" bites at home"

I began to learn more about Asperger's, the 'hidden disability' that would mask my son's needs and make his difficulties 'invisible' in school. If a child has a physical disability, this is visible and easier to deal with. But my son was a bright child with an advanced vocabulary and staff did not acknowledge his serious difficulties coping at school.

In the first year of primary school he suffered with anxiety attacks every morning about going to school. The scariest times were when he'd threaten to harm himself. At the school gate, he would have meltdowns and I would have to physically drag him in. He was often hyper and aggressive when he got home.

The teachers assured me that he was happy and calm at school. It is a fact that children with Asperger's 'hold it together' at school, trying not to get into trouble or be singled out, and then 'explode' when they get home. After several meetings with staff, it became clear they had no understanding of Asperger's and soon he was punished for saying or doing things that were a symptom of his autism.

Again, staff dismissed my concerns and made me feel like a neurotic, over-protective parent.

Meanwhile, the daily fight to get my son into school and his challenging behaviour once he came home was taking its toll on my family - the atmosphere at home became unbearable.

Eventually I had to give up work – the daily stresses and the ongoing fight to meet my son's needs became a full-time job. My days were spent calling helplines for advice, drafting letters to school, attending meetings with school staff and keeping a daily record of my son's crippling anxieties (this would provide crucial evidence to support our case later on).

This was the beginning of a long, costly battle to meet my son's special educational needs. I had to pay for three private assessments – Educational Psychologist (EP), Speech & Language Therapist (SALT) and Occupational Therapist (OT). Their recommendations were unanimous – my son had significant needs and needed a Statement.

Despite these expert recommendations, we had to fight the local authority all the way before we received an acceptable Statement. We had to go to Tribunal and I had to pay the legal fees and for expert witnesses to attend."

<http://www.specialneedsjungle.com/mothers-sen-statementing-battle-aspergers-son/>

There are many more tales like that on parent support forums. It leads to distress and parents being blamed for their child's behaviours. It can lead to misdiagnosis or lack of diagnosis, which entirely fails the child and sometimes, can have devastating effects on families who have their children taken. It is hard to understand why this continues to happen, when there is such a wealth of information about this phenomenon being common in autism. In fact, most children generally show a difference in behaviour between school and home (<http://www.parenting.co.uk/help/bad-behaviour-at-home.cfm>), even adults will put on their work face and let it all out at home! So why this disbelief of parents reporting that school is having a detrimental effect on their child?

It must be convenient for professionals who are resisting offering resources, to be able to say that a child is managing fine in school to fend off parents. But this is a breach of their duty of care towards that child and in the longer term is a higher cost to services when difficulties escalate. EHCPs (as with statements of SEN) are not only for academic difficulties. They are for social, emotional and mental health difficulties – anything that makes a child unable to fully access or participate in their education. If a child is reaching average levels academically, that is not necessarily an indicator that all is well. Many "high-functioning" autistics are very intelligent and above average, but are not reaching potential because of their difficulties. This leads to schools being complacent because it doesn't affect their league tables results! Legally, schools have a duty to ensure children with SEN's meet potential.

See further related numbered information sheets (2 "[The Overdiagnosis & Misdiagnosis of Attachment Disorder](#)", 3 "[False Accusations of Fabricated and Induced Illness Against Parents](#)", 5 "[Parental Recognition of Autism - Professionals Must Listen!](#)" & 7 "[Professionals/Authority and the Parent Blame Culture](#)" particularly) here: <http://evolutian.wix.com/planetautism#!/infofactsheets/khwqb> for further information and advice.