

The 'Emotional' component of WS comprises the following areas:

- Emotionality
- Anxiety

Emotionality

Profile: Parents and teachers describe the learner with WS as being emotional, oftentimes displaying extremes of emotion. This learner doesn't just feel happy, she feels elated, she doesn't just feel sad, she feels traumatised. She seems to feel very deeply and has difficulty regulating the intensity of these emotions. There are strong links here to maladaptive behaviours and to anxiety. Irish parents and teachers identified specific triggers for emotions that elicited negative behaviours; they included the learner not getting her own way, being told no (this appears to be a very significant issue), a teacher's disapproving tone, and a reprimand to the child or to her peers. There may also be a link between emotionality and sensory overload issues. Irish research by Tynan (2014) shows that the learner with WS frequently doesn't understand emotions, they cannot link the language of emotion to the actual feeling. Many subsequently can't express negative emotions and it emerges as an outburst. This links emotionality and challenging behaviours.

The learner with WS is also very concerned about the emotions of others. You may notice that she stares at your face, she 'reads' your facial expressions and tries to ascertain your mood. This can raise her anxiety. She is likely to display poor emotional regulation if she suspects that the teacher is in a bad mood or she may over-compensate and give lots of compliments to make you feel better. This can exhaust her and cause an emotional outburst later in the day.

On the bright side, some teachers described the very positive effect that this emotionality had on her class. The learner got excited by projects and school events and this impacted positively on the class atmosphere.

Strategies:

- Rather than using the word 'no' to a request say 'maybe' or 'we'll see' or 'I'll think about it'. This usually prevents a stand-off and the learner will frequently be distracted by something else in the interim.
- Find out what are the triggers for strong emotions.
- The use of lamh signs greatly reduces the emotionality that goes with certain requests or instructions. It is very well worth your while applying to do a lamh course through the SESS. There are only a few run every year so early booking is essential on www.sess.ie. This one-day course will give you enough lamh signs to

support the teaching of a learner with WS, even if she is verbal. Rather than saying 'focus on your work' you can do the sign for work/working and because there is no 'voice tone' the learner will usually settle quicker.

- There is a need to teach the language of emotions: happy, sad, angry, worried, frustrated, afraid, excited and embarrassed. The learner will have to be taught a 'script' to be able to verbalise emotion: 'I feel worried because ...' This needs to be generalised to real situations. It is all the more effective if you use this strategy yourself in class 'I feel excited today when I think of Grandparents' day on Friday', 'I feel frustrated that you didn't follow the rules going up to the PE hall, we've gone over the rules of running in the corridor so many times' etc.
- The use of puppets can be very useful when giving instructions or when giving advice to a learner with WS. She will not be focused on trying to read the emotions of the face.
- General class rules can be emphasised rather than isolating the learner with WS. Reminding everyone of 'good sitting' or 'quiet hands' when she is out of her seat can prevent an emotional reaction.
- It may be necessary to teach the child how to lose a game. This should be done in tandem with parents. Simple board games may be sent home for homework to reinforce the concept of being a good loser. Making a joke of it or singing a ditty when she loses can help. Also teaching a 'script' can help: 'I'm very disappointed that I lost that game, maybe I'll win the next one' etc.
- Smile! This is the simplest strategy. The learner with WS can take instructions much better when you smile and use a 'happy' tone of voice. She sees there is no 'threat' in your communication.
- Behaviour interventions in the classroom should be based on gaining rewards for good behaviour but NEVER take away a reward for subsequent negative behaviour. This causes strong emotional tension.
- Build up a strong trust with the learner. If you tell her something will happen you need to follow through. If you tell her she won't have to go to assembly (because of auditory sensitivity) make sure she is not forced into the situation. She needs to trust you to build up emotional security.
- It is useful to do the 'My Thoughts about School Checklist' from NEPS. Click [here](#) for additional questions to put with this checklist.

Anxiety

Profile: When learners with WS were asked what made them feel worried at school they said someone being mad, someone being in trouble, being in trouble themselves, being reprimanded by the principal or doing work incorrectly. Notice that most of these concern the teacher's behaviour; they affect the relationship between the learner and her teacher. Parents add to this list. They describe their child's anxiety as being generalised, anticipatory and phobic (of e.g. clapping or balloons bursting), which leads to avoidance. Teachers are more likely to see the results of the anxiety, where the anxiety itself is masked, but still

expressed through withdrawal or through maladaptive behaviours. You should be aware that anxiety and depression tend to increase significantly in adults with WS. Your successful interventions at school-age could impact hugely on their longer-term mental well-being.

Strategies:

- Think of a time you were really anxious yourself: waiting for exam results, waiting for medical test results, a job interview ... remember how anxiety feels. It can be very debilitating. Keep this in mind when teaching a learner with WS. Teach them with compassion and understanding.
- Find out if the learner has specific anxieties from both the parents and the learner herself. Be aware of the consequences of these anxieties.
- For generalised anxiety communicate clearly in the classroom, indicate the beginning of a lesson, the expected learner outcomes of the lesson and signal the end of the lesson. If the learner knows what to expect her anxiety should be lessened.
- The use of large visual schedules/timetables helps the learner to know that e.g. they are going to drama in the hall AFTER lunch so she won't keep asking. If she does keep asking, don't answer her, just point to the schedule. This way her anxiety is not rewarded by social contact from the teacher.
- The use of a countdown technique (counting from 10 to 0) can help a learner to go from a state of anxiety to a state of relaxation, get the learner to count and give instructions: deep breaths, you're feeling calmer now, you're safe, your teacher is here with you etc.
- Don't tell the learner about certain events until necessary, to prevent anticipatory anxiety.
- Use lamh signs to encourage and relax the learner as she is working. You might make a sign for good work, smile at her and when she sees you're happy with her she is more likely to engage more and to have reduced anxiety.
- Gradual desensitisation of specific anxieties can be done in conjunction with parents. If school assemblies are done where there is a lot of clapping the learner may actually refuse to go. Don't force this. They should be encouraged to slowly participate. This may start with being in their classroom with an adult with the classroom door opening and listening for sounds from the assembly. Draw their attention to singing or music if it can be heard, if there's clapping say something like 'oh someone must have done something good' so they understand clapping is part of celebration. Each week bring them a little closer. If you force them to attend they are likely to develop a phobic reaction to school assemblies ... this has happened!
- Give the learner a laminated card with the numbers 1-5 on it, get her to rate her anxiety on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being relaxed and 5 being highly anxious. Get her then to talk herself down to a lower number. Scripts can again be helpful: I am safe at school, my teacher is with me, my teacher always helps me, my friends at school always help me etc. This can work very successfully for anxiety that is not at phobic levels.

- Praise and reward the learner when she deals with her anxieties. Remember long-term anxiety can cause depression in later life.
- Appropriate differentiation of the curriculum can prevent certain anxieties.
- Reassure the learner when she is anxious but limit the amount of reassurance given. She may see this as a way of getting good quality teacher time. Be kind and understanding but have clear limits. Scripting as mentioned above can be very useful for this.
- Consider the use of a programme such as Friends for Life (NEPS) or Zippy's Friends (HSE North-West) as these are skills-based programmes which help all children with anxiety.

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