



**“NOW WHENEVER I GET ANXIOUS, I KNOW WHAT TO DO”**

## Children’s experiences of attending a CBT informed group therapy programme in CAMHS.

### Contact

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### Background

The importance of involving healthcare consumers in the business of service user experience has yet to be consistently embraced by mental health services, particularly within the domain of child mental health, where there is a dearth of research (McGrath et al. 2022).

The Secret Agent Society (SAS) is a manualised intervention for children with emotion regulation and social communication support needs (Beaumont and Sofronoff, 2008). Based on the principals of CBT, SAS has a substantial international research base supporting its effectiveness, including research conducted specifically within CAMHS in Ireland (MacEvilly et al. 2024). However, little is known about the views and experiences of children who have completed the programme.

### Aim

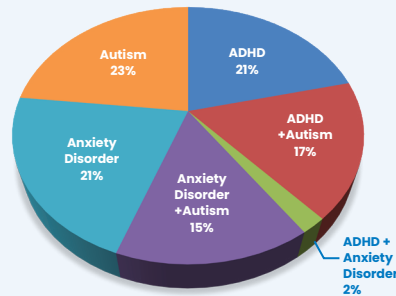
To explore children’s experiences of participating in SAS within CAMHS.

### Participants

47 children with moderate-severe mental health diagnoses, aged 8-12 years (males n=28, females n=19) took part. Their mean age was 10.11.

Children presented with diagnoses of autism (23%), ADHD (21%), anxiety disorder (21%), autism and ADHD (17%), autism and anxiety disorder (15%) or ADHD and anxiety disorder (2%).

### Children presented with the following diagnoses:



### Methodology

Children attended 9 weekly group sessions within their local community CAMHS. SAS content included:

| Topic                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ▶ Detecting emotions in others                                    |
| ▶ Detecting emotions in ourselves                                 |
| ▶ Relaxation gadgets                                              |
| ▶ Solving friendship problems                                     |
| ▶ Having conversations                                            |
| ▶ Playing with others                                             |
| ▶ Coping with mistakes                                            |
| ▶ Detecting the difference between accidents, jokes + nasty deeds |
| ▶ Preventing + managing bullying                                  |

Following completion of the intervention, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each child. Children were asked what they liked and didn't like about

SAS, what they found helpful and unhelpful, and suggestions for improvements. Interviews were analysed qualitatively using thematic content analysis.

### Results

Analysis of children’s responses revealed two Global Themes; ‘Intrapersonal Factors’ (intrinsic to the children and their experiences of SAS) and ‘Transactional Factors’ (experiences associated with the therapeutic environment):

| Global Themes |                                                |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1</b>      | <b>Intrapersonal Factors</b>                   |
| 1.1           | Mastering New Skills in Emotion Regulation     |
| 1.2           | Mastering New Skills in Social Problem Solving |
| 1.3           | Secondary Benefits                             |
| <b>2</b>      | <b>Transactional Factors</b>                   |
| 2.1           | Unique Features of the SAS programme           |
| 2.2           | Interpersonal Relationships                    |
| 2.3           | Emotional Climate                              |

### Theme 1: Intrapersonal factors

- ▶ Children reported increased capacity for recognising and regulating their emotions, with positive outcomes described in their everyday lives.
- ▶ Having a variety of strategies to use during times of emotional distress was important.
- ▶ Slow, mindful breathing was the most helpful strategy, followed by physical exercise.
- ▶ The most popular secondary benefit was the fun children experienced.

- “If one strategy doesn't work, you have 'back-ups' other than throwing yourself on the floor”
- “I learnt how to cope with getting angry, I used to go to my room in a huff but now I have things to do, like fidget toys”
- “I learnt that there are loads of things I can do to stay calm, like play with my dog”
- “When I used my O2 regulator the first time I was calmed down in about 5 minutes”
- “It helps you to create a better life for yourself knowing these things”

### Theme 2: Transactional factors

- ▶ Children valued the tangible therapeutic materials provided (collector SAS Code Cards, wallet)
- ▶ They disliked the home practice tasks, experiencing them as an extra demand
- ▶ Children described meeting others and making friends as welcome, beneficial and key to their engagement
- ▶ A strong therapeutic alliance with therapists enabled children to feel emotionally safe.

- “I liked the things that came with it, the fidget thing and the wallet”
- “The stuff that you get is really interesting, especially the new pen”
- “I didn't like talking about the missions at home, I've too much other homework”
- “I liked that I got to make new friends”
- “I was able to talk about my feelings in a secure place”

### Conclusions

These exploratory findings give a voice to primary school children with mental health diagnoses attending CBT informed group therapy in CAMHS. Responses showed that neurodivergent children as young as 8 were able to reflect on the value of mastering new social-emotional skills and to describe their priorities in mental health treatment.

The depth of experiences described provide new insight into the challenges and complexities associated with child centred intervention and have implications for future mental health service delivery and research.

### Program Link

Find out more about SAS:



### References

1. Beaumont, R. & Sofronoff, K. (2008). A multi-component social skills intervention for children with Asperger Syndrome: The junior detective training program. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49(7), 743-753.
2. MacEvilly, D., Maguire, K., Brosnan, G., Gaffney, L. (2024) Enhancing children's emotional regulation and social communication through group intervention – evidence of impact in an Irish outpatient Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 40: 1-21.
3. McGrath, J., Cawley, B., McTiernan, B., Marques, L., Gonciarz, E., Heron, E., Madden, J., Bond, L., Quinn, C., Mulholland, K., Dowling, B. (2022). Service user satisfaction with care in a specialist service for young people with ADHD. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 41 (1): 46-53.

