



Understanding and managing behaviour problems in children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders

This booklet has been written to offer an overview of some of the behavioural difficulties that may be experienced by children with an autistic spectrum disorder. It also offers guidelines on how to manage these behavioural difficulties. Some of the information may not relate to your situation because each child and their circumstances differ. While this booklet was written with children in mind, the strategies contained in it apply equally to young people and adults.

Contents	page
Autistic spectrum disorders and behavioural difficulties	2
'Triad of impairments'	2
Communication	2
Social interaction	3
Repetitive and stereotyped behaviour	3
Using behaviour to communicate	4
Setting	4
Trigger	4
Action	4
Results	4
Understanding your child's behaviour	5
Starting to think about making changes	5
Setting	6
Improving communication	6
Social skills development	7
Managing feelings	8
Increasing desirable behaviours	8
Management strategies	9
Useful tips to remember	11
Taking a break	12
Seeking professional help	12
Sources of Support	13
Courses and Training	13
Recommended Reading	13
STAR recording chart	15
Questions to establish the function of a type of behaviour	16
Managing behaviour – golden rules and tips for success	17
Structure	17
Clear rules and consistency	17
Do not rely on verbal communication	17
Recognise stress	17
Teaching skills	17
Behaviour	17
General	18



Autistic spectrum disorders and behavioural difficulties

Children with an autistic spectrum disorder can have behavioural difficulties regardless of their age and ability. Autism and Asperger's syndrome are seen as belonging to a spectrum, with varying levels of difficulty depending on where a child falls on the spectrum. Some children may experience significant difficulty and may also have a learning disability and need a lot of support. Others may be of average or above-average intelligence and have difficulties that may seem more subtle but are still important and warrant support. Although each child responds to difficulties in different ways, all will have some difficulty in each of the 'triad of impairments'.

The majority of children with an autistic spectrum disorder experience the world in a very different way to everyone else. The best way of reducing behavioural difficulties is by understanding the condition and the difficulties associated with it. Understanding also increases confidence, by explaining why development and behaviour are different for those with an autistic spectrum disorder. Once you understand the condition, the behavioural difficulties make a lot of sense. It may be surprising that more children do not show behavioural difficulties given that they need routine and structure and have difficulties with social communication.

'Triad of impairments'

The 'triad of impairments' associated with autistic spectrum disorders means that three main areas are affected, each of which often links up with specific behavioural difficulties.

Communication

All children with an autistic spectrum disorder have problems with communication. Language itself may not be affected, but the way in which language is used will be. Problems with communication can involve difficulties communicating with others (expressive) and difficulties understanding what others are saying (receptive). Children may find it hard to use language with others (for instance, they may use the tone of their voice (intonation) in an unusual way, increase the volume of their voice inappropriately, or find it hard to use non-verbal communication such as eye contact and facial expression.) They may also understand things in a very concrete or literal way, which can cause difficulties with metaphors, idioms or phrases, such as 'pull your socks up' or 'it's raining cats and dogs'.

If a child has difficulties communicating, they are less able to communicate their needs. Challenging behaviour can be used as a way of trying to get his or her needs across to someone else. It may be a way for them to show that they are confused or anxious about what is being said or suggested.



Social interaction

Everyone with an autistic spectrum disorder will have problems engaging with others in a two-way social situation. They may not look for social contact or know how to take turns in a conversation. They may be unaware of 'social rules' and may act as if other people do not exist, not answering when addressed. Social situations can be very stressful because they do not know what to expect or how to interact and so avoid contact with others. This may lead to inappropriate social behaviour, such as standing very close to others or interrupting conversations. Some may be interested in engaging socially, but may not make contact; they might approach others but in a 'one sided' way or approach adults rather than other children. They may be very formal, polite and stick rigidly to the 'social rules', having difficulty when they are required to be more flexible.

Repetitive and stereotyped behaviour

People with an autistic spectrum disorder may not have developed the ability to use their imagination. They may be creative but only in a specific area that interests them. Some find it hard to be creative at all, focussing on detail rather than the bigger picture. They may prefer having a routine rather than unpredictability. Very importantly, many find it hard to imagine a situation from another person's perspective and understand that someone else's thoughts might be different from their own.

The triad of impairments is often accompanied by a need to carry out familiar, repetitive activities. If a child cannot enjoy flexible, creative activities that involve exchanging ideas with others, they may feel reassured by doing the same things that they are used to and that they enjoy. For more able children, this may show as anxiety and upset when the preferred routine is broken, or fascination with specific hobbies or interests.

Behavioural difficulties may happen when there are changes to the routine and can be used as a way of coping with anxiety. Children might find it hard to imagine events in the future, or to understand another person's perspective, which may make them come across to others as being selfish, although they will often be unaware of this.

People with an autistic spectrum disorder often have sensory problems, in that the brain is unable to process sensory information in a typical way, either being over-sensitive, under-sensitive or having an inappropriate reaction to stimulation. This may show up as extreme agitation or distress in dealing with discomfort. Other ways of dealing with sensory problems include repetitive actions such as spinning, jumping or flicking of objects, which may be the child's way of getting some sensory input. Alternatively, lack of sensory input particularly through touch, might result in the child being able to tolerate larger amounts of heat and pain than normal.



Using behaviour to communicate

Many of the symptoms associated with autistic spectrum disorders lead to behavioural difficulties. It is important to have a clear idea about how your child is affected by each of these symptoms when considering each area of behaviour.

A STAR analysis is a helpful way of assessing what happens before, during and after an episode of unacceptable behaviour, and is similar to an ABC chart. The STAR framework was set up by the National Autistic Society to reduce the behavioural problems that so many parents of children with an autistic spectrum disorder face. The STAR approach focuses on those with an autistic spectrum disorder rather than children with general behavioural difficulties, although it can still be helpful for this group. The basis of the STAR approach is that all episodes of problem behaviour need to be seen as actions with a purpose to receive a specific response.

STAR stands for:

Setting Trigger Action Response

Setting

This is something critical but often underestimated. These are the contexts in which the unacceptable behaviour takes place. Considering, and if needed adjusting, the setting where the behaviour takes place is important, and can also work as a way of preventing particular behavioural difficulties.

Trigger

These are the signals or stimuli that 'set off' a specific action, occurring immediately before the episode of unacceptable behaviour. Reasons that trigger sets of the behaviour may include:

- Expressing a need – for example, smelling dinner cooking might signal food to a hungry child
- Expressing something the child does not want – for example, seeing a spider nearby triggers a wish to avoid it, or wearing a particular outfit could trigger the need to avoid something the child finds too difficult, such as a family gathering or somewhere new.
- Emotional overload – something relatively insignificant triggers the feeling that this is 'the last straw'.

Action

Action is the behaviour that actually happens and is a very important part of the chart

Response

These are the events that follow an action, and are often the part of the process that can be controlled. Response to an action can indicate the appropriateness of an action and influence the likelihood that the child will do the same thing at some point in the future.

This is an example of recording an episode:

Date and time	Setting	Trigger	Action	Response
23/8/05 7.30pm	On the computer	Asked to go to speak to granny on the phone	Shouting Yelling Refusing to come to phone	Carried on with computer



A basic STAR recording chart is included at the back of this booklet, which you can photocopy and use as your own record. We have also included a list of questions for you to use to help understand the function of a particular type of behaviour.

Understanding your child's behaviour

Once you have thought about the setting for the episode of unacceptable behaviour, you need to think about the function of that behaviour for your child; that is, what the child is trying to achieve by behaving in this way. For instance, this type of behaviour might be a form of communication, such as asking for attention, refusing something, expressing a need or a feeling. It can often help to consider challenging behaviour as a form of communication, although it might not feel like this at times. Children often use behaviour to communicate, as they do not have a more effective way of communicating as yet.

Working out the function of a type of behaviour will help to understand what your child is trying to communicate. You need to enter your child's world and try to see the world as they do. The function of a type of behaviour might include:

- Confusion or fear produced by unfamiliar events and situations
- Interference with daily routine or repetitive activities
- Inability to understand explanations or instructions
- Lack of knowledge about how to behave appropriately
- Inability to communicate needs and feelings
- Over-sensitivities
- Specific fears of situations or objects
- Pressure to do tasks that are too difficult.

Functional analysis is a way of analysing and understanding your child's behaviour, so that you have a clear idea about what is triggering the behaviour and keeping it going. It can help to think about the function of behaviour as an iceberg. We are often able to see the behaviour, but need to think a bit deeper to work out what it means, rather like the iceberg, most of which is out of sight.

Once we have worked out why a type of behaviour is happening, we can work out if there are patterns. The best and most accurate way of doing this is to keep records using the STAR chart mentioned previously. Keeping accurate records and spending time assessing the pattern of behaviour makes it more likely that any changes you try to bring about will work.

Starting to think about making changes

When thinking about dealing with a behavioural problem, it is worth focussing on one or two areas to change. Usually, this is the type of behaviour that is of most concern or is impacting most significantly on daily life. Some parents find it helps to select something that may not be too difficult to start with so that you can feel more confident in tackling other problem areas. Narrowing the behaviours down can help to understand



why a particular type of behaviour is occurring so that you can work out ways of changing or managing it. Trying to tackle several areas at once can make it difficult to achieve any positive changes in any area, which can affect your confidence greatly.

The main focus of any behavioural intervention should always be on the development of new skills to help your child to cope with his or her environment and to communicate their needs. To make this change lasting, the aim is to provide him or her with other ways of achieving the outcome, previously achieved through difficult behaviour. This means that he or she will have a new way of communicating and will not need to rely on the difficult behaviour.

Setting

There are lots of ways to make the world easier to understand, and here are some suggestions:

- **Environment** – Keeping the environment around the child calm with low amounts of stimulation can avoid anxiety. Things that might set off a sensory reaction can include intense sounds, touch, taste, vision, smell and pain so these should be reduced as far as possible.
- **Attention** – Paying attention is often a problem area for children with an autistic spectrum disorder, as they may prefer to pay attention to other things that interest them especially if social interaction is not enjoyable. Their focus might switch from one thing to another very quickly, especially in the case of sounds, so keeping their environment quiet can be helpful.

- **Organisation** – This might not come naturally to these children as they focus on small details rather than seeing the bigger picture. Visual cues can be very helpful to reinforce spoken instructions or plans, and can include pictures, objects and even written instructions (depending on their ability). A visual timetable of what is happening each week, combining routine and visual cues, can also help with understanding the sequence in which things happen. It has the added bonus of allowing the child to be more independent, without the need for being told what is happening and when.

Improving communication

Difficulties with communication are often a major feature in many behavioural difficulties for children with an autistic spectrum disorder. Improving a child's ability to communicate as well as the way we communicate with them can be a key part of many behavioural interventions. There are a number of strategies that can improve communication with and understanding of others, such as:

- Providing as wide a range of communication and social opportunities as appropriate to your child as possible
- Use words that your child will understand
- Avoid sarcasm, metaphors or ambiguous phrases
- Use concrete terms especially regarding abstract concepts such as time
- Be positive when offering instructions, for instance, do not tell your child what not to do but focus on what they



should be doing

- Say things in the order in which they will happen
- Repetition can help with memory as can visual clues. It is often easier for someone to remember something if they have a picture to go with the instruction.

A speech and language therapist can help assess communication skills and develop an appropriate programme to improve them, often using an alternative or augmentative communication strategy. Speech and language therapists work in the NHS and privately but also in education.

Social skills development

Difficulties with social interaction can also be a major cause of difficulty and distress for people with an autistic spectrum disorder. Not knowing how to behave or what is expected can lead to anxiety and behavioural difficulties. Possible strategies that can be useful in starting to develop social understanding and skills include:

- **Social skills training** – This approach involves teaching a child the skills necessary to cope with social situations directly. It may include instruction around a variety of areas depending on the child's needs. Some of these could include eye contact, appropriate use of gesture, appropriate distance from others, understanding non-verbal communication, appropriate topics for conversation and how to start and finish a conversation. Social skills groups are run in some parts of the country and can sometimes be useful

in developing skills. Alternatively, there are a number of good books and resources available to help people with an autistic spectrum disorder to develop social skills (for details see the reading list at the end of this booklet). The important thing is that social skills are used in a variety of contexts so that the person is able to start transferring their skills to various environments, rather than in just the one setting where they may have learnt the skill. All the evidence indicates that this is most likely to produce long-lasting change.

- **Social stories** – This approach has been developed to help those with an autistic spectrum disorder to develop their understanding of relevant social cues and learn appropriate responses. Social stories can relieve some of the anxiety of social situations by providing structure and guidelines for expected behaviour. (For details see the reading list at the end of this booklet).
- **'Circle of friends' and mentoring** – 'Circle of friends' is an approach for school-aged children that involves identifying a group of peers who may be interested in spending time with a child with an autistic spectrum disorder and help to engage them in activities at school and sometimes beyond. Peer mentors or 'buddies' can be helpful in improving social interaction and understanding by allowing the person to follow the mentor's behaviour and through offering help and support when needed.



Managing feelings

Children with an autistic spectrum disorder do not always find it easy to manage their feelings. They can become overwhelmed and feel unable to cope. An important skill to learn is the ability to monitor and manage their own emotions and behaviour, so that they can identify and respond appropriately to situations, which in turn increases independence and confidence. Possible strategies include:

- **Learning to identify feelings** – Many people with autistic spectrum disorders have difficulty understanding their own and others emotions. Emotions training can help by teaching an individual to read and respond to the cue that represent particular emotions, such as facial expressions and body language in other people and bodily sensations in themselves.
- **Relaxation** – Relaxation approaches such as deep breathing, thinking positively, redirection to pleasant, calming activities such as taking a bath, listening to relaxing music, playing on a computer, having a swing or jumping on a trampoline can start to help someone manage their anxiety.
- **Anger management** – Some children with autistic spectrum disorder may have difficulty managing emotions such as stress, anxiety and frustration, which can sometimes be expressed as outbursts of anger or aggression. It can help to identify the physical sensations that show they are becoming agitated and then to develop a range of alternative, more appropriate activities to help them calm down. These can include breathing exercises, counting

exercises, going for a walk, listening to music, walking away from the scene or asking for help. The child should also be supported to develop the communication skills needed to show distress and ask for help.

Increasing desirable behaviours

There are several ways to encourage the development of new skills by the way we respond to the child with an autistic spectrum disorder. The following are a number of approaches that have been proven to be helpful:

- **Positive reinforcement** – This refers to a strengthening of a particular behaviour by following it with something desirable such as favourite foods (edibles), toys or objects (tangibles), activities, praise or social reinforcement or sensory-based reinforcement such as a tickle. For any of these to lead to an increase in desired behaviour, it is essential that the child and their particular likes, interests and level of ability are taken into account. If they are not motivated or do not enjoy what has been chosen to reinforce the preferred behaviour, it will have little impact. The thing chosen to reinforce preferred behaviour also needs to be 'novel', that is, an activity or object that is not readily available. It also needs to be changed as often as necessary to make sure your child does not get bored or tired of it. You will need to plan ahead and have a variety of items to use as reinforcement, but remember to take your own resources into account. It is far better to offer something small and manageable and to be able to continue to offer this each time.



Reinforcement works best when it is provided immediately after the desired behaviour has occurred and when it is given every time the child behaves in the desired way. It can gradually be faded out over time, but not too quickly. The item used for reinforcement should be given alongside verbal praise that clearly describes the behaviour you are praising, such as "That's nice sharing, Jack!"

- **Token systems** – For some children, using token systems is a very useful way of increasing the number of times preferred behaviour happens. Token systems are a type of positive reinforcement that involve your child collecting points, ticks, stars, sticker, small objects or symbols that might not be enough to reinforce behaviour on their own, but which can eventually be swapped for a larger item to reinforce preferred behaviour. So, for instance, three stars might mean that your child gets to play their favourite game for five minutes. Token systems usually work best for 'higher functioning' children who are able to wait for their reward and understand visual symbols. Verbal praise and encouragement should still be provided as your child achieves each token.
- **Prompting** – This is a technique that can help your child learn new skills by providing the level of assistance needed to finish a task or activity. The following suggestions are ranked in order from the most intrusive and supportive to the least: physical, gesture, verbal or environmental. Prompting is paired with reinforcement to strengthen each stage of learning a

particular skill. The ultimate goal is for your child to complete a task on their own without prompts.

- **Shaping** – This refers to the process by which you gradually reinforce preferred behaviour that have been broken down into steps and start to put them together until you are able to create the desired response. An example of shaping may be a child eating independently. Initially, reinforcement might be needed to the child reaching for the spoon, then once this stage is mastered, reinforcement would be held back until the child actually picks up the spoon and so on until the child is spooning food into his or her mouth. An alternative example might be the process of greeting someone and starting to have a conversation.

Management strategies

As well as introducing positive behavioural strategies, it is sometimes necessary to have a range of strategies available to respond to a behavioural incident or outburst. **None of the following should ever be implemented on its own.** If you need to use any of the following strategies, then you should also start to use a range of positive strategies on a regular basis at the same time.

We all use experience to work out how we are going to behave. If we find that we do something that brings about a good outcome, we will do it again, and we are more likely to behave that way in the future. This is human nature and it happens all the time. Similarly, if we find out that something we do does not bring about a favourable outcome, we are less



likely to do it again. This principle gives us helpful ways of managing undesirable behaviour, including:

- **Extinction or planned ignoring**
 - This refers to the strategy where undesirable behaviour is ignored rather than ignoring the child doing it. This is because responses provided by others, such as attention or providing an object or activity, may be maintaining an unwanted type of behaviour, even without you realising it. Planned ignoring involves providing no response to the behaviour, including verbal comments, body language, facial expression or eye contact.

This needs to be coupled with other strategies such as positive reinforcement to give your child opportunity to learn alternative ways of achieving what they want. In other words, for this to work, you need to be ready to respond to and reinforce your child's appropriate behaviour as well as not responding to inappropriate behaviour.

When thinking about planned ignoring, it is important to be consistent. When you first try the strategy, your child's inappropriate behaviour will increase before it decreases. **You may well think that everything is getting worse, but it is important not to give up.** This increase in undesirable behaviour is called an 'extinction burst' and can be seen as your child saying, "This has worked for me before. Maybe I need to try harder to get the usual response." Consistency is very important at this point, otherwise your child will learn that increasing the wrong behaviour

will bring about the desired response and he or she may escalate to the same point the next time as well.

Planned ignoring can be used with a number of behavioural difficulties but it should never be used when there is risk of harm to the individual or others.

- **Redirection** – Redirecting your child's attention to a preferred topic of conversation or activity can be an extremely effective way of preventing a situation getting worse or diffusing a difficult situation. It can be helpful to have a range of calming and distracting strategies lined up to use if your child starts to get agitated. Having started to use your STAR recording charts, you will have a good feel for the kinds of things that act as triggers, setting off a particular type of behaviour. You can start to predict these and use redirection. Relaxation strategies and anger management techniques (see previous section) can be used to redirect and refocus your child when distressed. It can be helpful for your child and others to be aware of their triggers, which, although they vary from person to person, could include swearing, pacing, hand biting and talking to him or herself, and to be ready to redirect your child's attention to a calming activity as soon as they are noticed.
- **Time out** – This approach involves time out from positive reinforcement that may or may not include physically removing your child from the area. When carried out appropriately, time out can provide your child with the opportunity to calm down by limiting



external stimulation. They need to be informed why time out is being used, and this information can be backed up with visual cues, such as picture symbols or social stories if necessary. You can draw up what is sometimes called a 'behavioural contract' to explain clearly what is going to happen and why.

If a time out area is used, it is very important that this be an identified uninteresting but safe space where there is no risk of your child harming himself or herself and he or she can be observed unseen to protect them. Time out should never be longer than a few minutes and any reductions in agitation should be encouraged. Following time out, your child should be redirected to a calming neutral activity and reinforcement provided for the first occurrence of appropriate behaviour.

- **Punishment** – This involves the use of an unpleasant response to reduce an undesirable behaviour and can include smacking, shouting or physical restraint. Lots of research has shown that this strategy does not work. It is not an effective way of promoting learning. It is not effective because it does not address the root cause of the behaviour. It may reduce it in the short term, but often it will quickly be replaced by another undesirable behaviour because the cause has not been addressed. The only thing it teaches is that it is all right to be aggressive and can also lead to aggression in response to the person administering it. It also leads to a child feeling bad about themselves and angry inside, which can then worsen their behaviour. **Punishment is not a viable way of changing behaviour.**

Useful tips to remember

- **Consistency** – One of the most important things to remember when carrying out any behavioural strategy or intervention is the need for a consistent approach. Without the support and commitment of those surrounding the child, for instance, family, school and friends, lasting changes will be harder to make. If a strategy is proving too difficult to implement consistently, then it is worth going back to review the strategy and make any necessary adjustments.
- **Generalisation** – Generalising new skills that have been learnt in a particular situation can be an area that presents special challenges to children with autistic spectrum disorders. It is therefore essential that special care be taken to assist your child to apply new skills and coping strategies to a variety of situations.
- **Maintenance** – From time to time, it may be necessary to go back and revisit a particular strategy or approach if your child is experiencing difficulties. This will make sure that new skills are kept up over time. This may particularly be the case around times of illness, stress or change.
- **Fading out prompts and reinforcement** – Our ultimate goal for any behavioural intervention should always be to increase your child's independence, quality of life and self-efficacy. To this end, it is important that any prompts or reinforcements, with the exception of verbal praise, be very gradually reduced to as low a level as possible while continuing the desired change in behaviour.



Taking a break

Dealing with challenging behaviours can be highly demanding for parents and carers. All parents need a break from caring for their children from time to time – this is normal and healthy. Making sure that you have the energy to respond appropriately to and to support an individual with challenging behaviours is one of the most important aspects of any intervention. Thinking about your own needs means that you will be better equipped to provide the best support possible to your child or family member with an autistic spectrum disorder.

Support from partners, family, friends or neighbours can be extremely important. However, help can sometimes also be requested from social services. The sort of help that might be available will vary according to the individual and their particular needs, but can include things like respite, home help, funding for equipment or holidays, or home modifications. Write to your local social services department and request an assessment of the individual's needs under Section 47 of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 for adults or under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 for children. You can also request an assessment of your needs as a carer under the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995 and the Carers and Disabled Children Act 2000.

Seeking professional help

You should always think about getting professional help if your child is showing any of the following signs:

- Difficult behaviour is putting themselves or others at risk, for instance, through self injury or aggression
- Difficult behaviour is happening in several situations and behavioural strategies are not working after trying them for a number of months
- If, as a parent or carer, you are finding it difficult to cope with your child's behaviour.

The first point of contact should be your GP. You will need to describe your difficulties and then ask to be referred to your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). It will be helpful if you are able to keep a diary using the STAR recording chart so that your GP has a good understanding of the difficulties. You will then be referred to a specialist, usually a clinical psychologist, who will be able to think with you about how to make changes. It will be helpful for you to take your STAR recording charts with you to this appointment.



Sources of Support

For more detailed information regarding professionals who might be able to assist with behavioural difficulties in individuals with autism, you can contact:

National Autistic Society:

Autism Helpline

393 City Road

London, EC1V1NG

Tel: 0845 0704004 (opening hours

Monday to Friday 10am-4pm)

Website: www.nas.org.uk

Email: autismhelpline@nas.org.uk

The Autism Helpline holds a database of specialists who have indicated that they have expertise or interest in the area of autistic spectrum disorders. Some may be approached for NHS or private consultations.

Other organisations that would be able to assist you with finding a specialist include:

British Psychological Society (BPS)

St Andrews House

48 Princess Road East

Leicester LE1 7DR

Tel: 0116 254 9568

Fax: 0116 247 0787

Website: www.bps.org.uk

Email: enquiry@bps.org.uk

British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

BABCP General Office

Globe Centre

PO Box 9

Accrington, BB5 2GD

Tel: 01254 875277

Fax: 01254 239114

Website: www.babcp.com

Email: babcp@babcp.com

Courses and Training

The National Autistic Society offers a range of courses that focus on understanding and managing behaviour. Please visit this webpage for more information:

www.nas.org.uk/courses/behaviour.html

Alternatively, you might like to get in touch with your local autistic society for further information regarding upcoming courses in your area, many of which are held by the National Autistic Society.

Recommended Reading

If you are unable to get a copy of any of these books from your bookshop, you should be able to order them through your local library to borrow for a few weeks.

Janice Adams (1995) *Autism – PDD: creative ideas during the school years* (published by Adams Publications)

Tony Attwood (1998) *Asperger Syndrome: a guide for parents and professionals* (published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers)

John Clements and Eva Zarkowska (2000) *Behavioural concerns and autistic spectrum disorders: explanations and strategies for change* (published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers)

Beth Fouse and Maria Wheeler (1997) *A treasure chest of behavioural strategies for individuals with autism* (published by Future Horizons)

Carol Gray (2002) *My social stories book* (published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers)



Liz Hannah (2001) Teaching young children with autistic spectrum disorders to learn (published by Crowes Complete Print)

Patricia Howlin (1998) Children with autism and Asperger syndrome: a guide for practitioners and carers (published by John Wiley & Sons)

Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council (1998) Asperger syndrome: practical strategies for the classroom: a teacher's guide (published by The National Autistic Society)

Leicestershire County Council and Fosse Health Trust (1998) Autism: how to help your young child (published by The National Autistic Society)

Eric Schopler (ed) (1995) Parent survival manual (published by Plenum Press)

Lorna Wing (1996) The autistic spectrum: a guide for parents and professionals (published by Constable)

Philip Whitaker (2001) Challenging behaviour and autism: making sense – making progress (published by The National Autistic Society)

Publishers' websites

Jessica Kingsley publications
www.jkp.com

National Autistic Society
www.nas.org.uk



Questions to establish the function of a type of behaviour

(Adapted from Willis and LaVigna, 1993.)

1. What happens during a behavioural incident? What does the behaviour 'look like'?
2. How often does the behaviour occur?
Several times each day, daily, weekly
3. How long does the behaviour last?
4. How severe is the behaviour?
5. What time of day is the behaviour most likely to occur?
6. Where, or in what environments are the behaviours most likely to occur?
7. With whom are the behaviours most likely to occur?
8. What activity is most likely to produce the behaviour?
9. Are there any other events or situations that can trigger the behaviour (such as particular demands, delays or transitions between activities)?
10. What does your child gain by engaging in the behaviour?
What is the consequence or outcome for your child?
11. What is avoided by engaging in the behaviour?
12. Is your child experiencing any medical issues that may be affecting their behaviour, such as toothache, earache, infections, colds, flu, allergies, rashes or seizures?
13. Is your child experiencing difficulty with sleeping or eating?
14. How predictable is your child's daily routine? To what extent does he or she know what is happening throughout the day and when?
15. Have there been any recent changes to routine?
16. How does your child communicate the following:
 - Yes, no or stop
 - Indicate physical pain
 - Request help
 - Request attention
 - Request preferred food, objects or activities
 - Request a break
17. What objects, activities or events does your child enjoy?
18. What skills or behaviours does your child have that may be alternative ways of achieving the same function as the behaviour of concern?



Managing behaviour – golden rules and tips for success

Structure

- Too much choice causes anxiety
- Environment must be structured, organised and predictable – this includes them knowing:
 - Where do I have to be?
 - What am I doing?
 - How much do I have to do?
 - When will I know if I am finished?
 - What will I do next?
- Offer clear breaks in between activities to unwind and relax

Clear rules and consistency

- Have they understood?
- Be consistent – make sure you follow through with what you say
- No surprises – always let them know ahead if there have been changes to plans
- Use language that is clear and concrete
- Give plenty of warning

Do not rely on verbal communication

- Put it in writing
- Use plans and timetables, photos and pictures

Recognise stress

- Do not crowd or overload with information
- Allow personal space

Teaching skills

- Make sure you have their attention
- Allow extra time for processing information
- Break the skills down into achievable steps to ensure success
- Use prompts to teach alternative behaviours
- Use their interest to teach a skill
- Reward success regularly and explicitly
- Short and brief verbal instructions
- Lots of praise

Behaviour

- Find ways of coping with aspects of the environment that cause distress, such as noise level
- Try to prevent a behaviour from taking place – if it cannot be prevented it should not be rewarded as it will get stronger
- Consistently observe the behaviour and your responses, and then think about change
- Monitor changes through recording systematically - only adjust method after trying it for a sustained period (weeks not days).
- Behaviour that is rewarded is more likely to be repeated, behaviour that is not rewarded is less likely to be repeated – reward any appropriate behaviour immediately



- Try to reward a different and more appropriate activity to replace the inappropriate behaviour.
- Inconsistency tends to make the behaviour worse
- Your child is complex and it will take time to understand him or her – you will need to be patient and persevere and remember that results take time

General

- Regular physical exercise tends to diminish aggressive behaviour and repetitive activities
- Changes need to be planned and introduced slowly and gradually – let your child know in advance
- Adapt methods of communication so that they can understand what is wanted
- Avoid putting pressure on them to perform above their ability.



Notes



Notes

Compiled by the Social Communication Disorders Clinic, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service in collaboration with the Child and Family Information Group.

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