

# Understanding and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours



All behaviours have triggers and functions although it is not always so easy to spot them with a child on the autism spectrum. Sometimes you need to take a step back and try to see the world from your child's perspective and look at the behaviour in the context of the difficulties he or she experiences everyday.

**Behaviour:** the way in which a person acts or responds to a particular situation or stimulus.

Insights gained from the experiences of adults with autism can help us understand why a child may be behaving as they do.

Autism West Midlands information sheet "A Guide to Autism" outlines what an Autism Spectrum Condition is and outlines the areas in which people on the autism spectrum experience difficulties:

- Communication
- Think and behave flexibly (eg. need for routine and dislike of change)
- Social interaction
- Sensory

In this information sheet we will look at these areas in relation to behaviour.

## Difficulties in Communication

Children on the autism spectrum may be unable to communicate what they want or may not be able to express what are feeling. They may also find it difficult to understand what they are being told and interpret the subtleties of social communication (body language, gesture, jokes and sarcasm). The link between communication and behaviour can often be easier to spot among children who have limited spoken language but the communication difficulties of a child with a mild autism presentation (sometimes referred to as Asperger Syndrome) are significant yet can sometimes be over looked.

*"I can remember the frustration of not being able to talk. I knew what I wanted to say, but I could not get the words out, so I would just scream."*  
(Temple Grandin)

# Understanding and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours

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## **Need for Routine/ Dislike of Change**

Children on the autism spectrum have difficulties in thinking and behaving flexibly which results in a need for routine and dislike of change. Unfortunately they can't avoid facing changes in their every day lives; teachers are sometimes off sick, TV schedules may change and family plans may have to change. Dealing with change leads to high levels of anxiety which can be shown in behaviour.

"At school everything changes so often...going into a classroom to find that we have to join another class because the teacher is off, or move desks for no apparent reason, all add to the hassle of school" (Luke Jackson)

## **Social Interaction Difficulties**

Social interaction is a complex task involving hidden social rules and interpreting and responding to the behaviour of others. It is difficult to plan and is not predictable. It is sometimes easier to avoid social situations and particular behaviours can achieve that effect.

"I am unable to 'read into' people's behaviour or read the intentions behind it and therefore not able to predict their actions. It comes across as very threatening and frightening most of the time" (Ros Blackburn)

"I am always being told off for standing too close to people and following them around all the time but it is very difficult to know when it is right to follow someone around and carry on talking and when the conversation has ended and I am leave to leave them alone." (Luke Jackson)

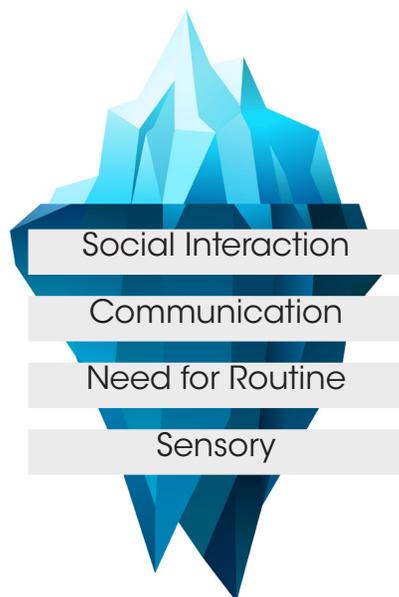
## **Sensory Difficulties**

Many children on the autism spectrum are over or under sensitive to sensory stimulus. Situations where there are loud noises, strong smells or where there is close contact, such as crowded places, can be very stressful for them. Children who are already experiencing high levels of anxiety due to the other difficulties mentioned above will find it even harder to cope with sensory stimuli.

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## Specific Behaviours



## The Bottom of the Iceberg

Providing structure to the day

Children on the autism spectrum benefit from predictability. This is sometimes why some children seem to cope better at school where there is a fixed timetable than they do at home where things are much more flexible. Knowing the answer to the following questions can help reduce stress and anxiety

1. What will happen next
2. What I am expected to do
3. How long it will last

Verbal children may constantly ask these questions of their parent (this can be very tiring and lead to conflict) and non verbal children may be showing their need for predictability by their behaviour. Creating some structure to the day and communicating it to your child in a visual way can really help.

## The Iceberg approach

If the difficult behaviours we see from a child on the autism spectrum are seen as the tip of the iceberg then the difficulties mentioned above can be seen as the large area of the iceberg underneath the water that we cannot see.

Therefore tackling behaviours needs to be done in two ways:

Understanding the underlying causes of anxiety, minimising these where possible and helping your child cope with the stresses of every day life (the bottom of the iceberg)

Working with your child to target specific behaviours (the tip of the iceberg)

## Visual methods of communication

Most of us benefit from using visual methods of learning. Many of us rely on calendars, shopping lists and apps on mobile phones to get us through each day. Children on the autism spectrum particularly benefit from visual methods which can help reduce stress from everyday difficulties with communication, social interaction and coping with change. The following are a few examples:

- Daily or weekly calendars to show forthcoming activities and events.
- Picture sequence charts or checklists that show a task broken down into its parts eg. a morning routine. This could use photos or clip art pictures or be a written check list.
- First and next charts – younger children and those with a learning difficulty can be reassured by a two step chart showing what we are doing now and what we are doing next.
- Countdowns to a particular event (birthday, holiday, weekend visit to parent/relative), this could be by crossing off days on a calendar or by using an arrow that you move along a chart nearer towards a photo of the event/person.
- Social stories™ written for specific situations and read frequently. They are simple descriptions of everyday social situations, written from a child's perspective, which help them prepare for changes in routine, or learn appropriate social interactions.
- For more information visit <http://www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories>

## Photos, picture or words?

There is no wrong or right way to use visual resources but you will learn what works best for your child. Younger children and those with learning difficulties may need photos of the actual item (eg their cup or their bed), others will cope well with photos from the internet, clip art images or line drawings. Older children and teenagers sometimes reject picture charts as too babyish but do not presume this is the case; there are many teenagers who find pictures more useful than a simple checklist and may be more likely to use them if they are involved in creating them.

# Understanding and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours

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## Preparing for change

It is not always possible to prepare your child for change, sometimes changes happen unexpectedly like the teacher being ill or the road being closed so a different route has to be taken to school. However there are many events that we can plan and prepare for and also potential changes that can be talked through with your child. Use the visual approaches listed above and incorporate some flexibility eg a question mark on your daily calendar instead of an activity to indicate we don't know yet.

## Keeping stress to a minimum

The following are some simple ideas that often forgotten in the heat of the moment but can really help in preventing you and your child's anxiety levels from rising.

- When talking to your child get their attention, use their name and get eye contact if they are able
- Give one instruction at a time and use fewer words
- Use the positive rather than the negative eg "walk please" rather than "don't run"
- Allow more time for processing, don't repeat a request too soon
- Use distraction when you are heading towards conflict
- Give positive feedback and praise
- Ignore negative behaviours where ever possible
- Show your child that you understand and acknowledge their difficulties
- Stay calm and use a calm voice if you can
- If your child is having a "meltdown" (temper tantrum/outburst) stop verbal communication, they can probably no longer process it.
- Choose a quiet time later when you have all calmed down to discuss inappropriate and alternative behaviours, remembering to stay calm.
- Try not to take things personally, it's not your fault nor is your child deliberately misbehaving to get at you.

# Understanding and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours

## The Tip of the Iceberg

### Changing behaviour

Before we think about changing behaviours we need to find out what is causing or triggering them. Remember behaviour can be a form of communication.

### Keep a record

Keep a diary – sometimes a simple diary where you record instances throughout the day can help you identify a pattern.

Video – most mobile phones have video cameras and they can sometimes be useful with young children to share with others what is happening and get another perspective. With older children and teenagers it can help you to share with them, after the event, what happened and help them to think about causes and triggers. However be cautious about starting to video a child during a meltdown as it can sometimes escalate the situation and be counter productive.

ABC charts - An ABC Chart is another way of recording events and can help you analyse exactly what went on in each situation. ABC stands for Antecedent, Behaviour and Consequence.

Date and time	Antecedent	Behaviour	Consequence
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• what happened before the behaviour occurred</li><li>• where it happened</li><li>• what others were doing</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What the child did in detail</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What happened next</li><li>• How others responded</li><li>• How did the Behaviour finish</li><li>• Any changes in the environment</li><li>• How did the child feel afterwards.</li></ul>

# Understanding and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours



By recording in this way you may find clues to the function of different behaviours.

Some common functions include

- Social attention – getting other peoples attention
- To get something – grabbing, snatching things
- Escape or avoid something – running away, biting
- Sensory – sniffing things, banging things

There may not be an obvious trigger in all cases but it will help you decide what your next step will be.

Prioritise which behaviour to tackle and be realistic; you cannot change everything at once. There may be some behaviours that you decide aren't really a problem, perhaps they annoy or upset you but are not really a problem for your child. Then from the list of other behaviours decide what you want to change first, this may not be the most extreme behaviour but the one with which that you think you have most chance of success.

Is it the right time to change things? Be wary of trying to change things at times when your child is already coping with lots of change eg. moving schools, when there have been changes in the family or unsettling times of the year are approaching such as Christmas or birthdays.

Can you change the environment? Is a practical solution the answer? If difficult behaviour always occurs when you are in the supermarket then shopping when your child is at school or using the internet may be good solution. You can then move down your list and tackle a different behaviour. Similarly it may be easier for the moment to put a lock on the fridge or kitchen door rather than try and get your child to stop raiding it for food at night. It doesn't mean that you will always have to shop without your child or always have a lock on the fridge but it may be easier to tackle this another time and there is always a chance the behaviour may pass of its own accord.

# Understanding and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours

Is your reaction or the reaction of others around your child making the behaviour worse? Try changing your behaviour and see what happens. Children on the autism spectrum love predictability so we sometimes get trapped in patterns of difficult behaviour because a child knows that if they behave in a certain way they get a certain reaction. However make sure you tell all those who are involved in caring for your child what you are planning to do and try to get everyone to behave in a consistent way.

**Caution** – once you change something it is likely that the behaviour will get worse to start with. Your child will seek the reassurance of the familiar so will try harder to make sure you go back to behaving the way you did before. It may take some weeks of their behaviour getting worse before they realise you mean it, if you give in during this time they will have learnt that they just have to keep behaving in this way to get what they want and next time they will keep going for longer and the behaviour may be more extreme.

## Using rewards to change behaviour

Most parents have used reward charts with their children, however with children on the autism spectrum traditional reward systems may need some adjustments to ensure they work.

- Make sure the target is specific and achievable.
  - Sit at the table at mealtimes ✓
  - Be a good boy ✗
- Encourage positives rather than the negatives
  - Let's try one more time ✓
  - Don't swear at Mummy ✗
- Give a token/sticker each time the target is met and never take away the token previously earned if negative behaviour is displayed later. The aim is to reward positive behaviour and ignore negative.
- When enough tokens are earned the child gets the reward. Make sure the number of tokens needed before the reward is received is realistic. For a young child it might be a little as three.
- Make sure the reward is something the child wants, try to avoid rewarding with money or new toys but use things that are important to your child and will motivate him/her. Rewards could be...
  - Watching a favourite DVD or choosing a DVD to watch with the family
  - Extra time on the PlayStation, Xbox, computer
  - A trip out to a favourite place

# Understanding and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours

## Anger and aggression

At the start of this information sheet we talked about the difficulties children on the autism spectrum experience on a daily basis and how this means children live with high levels of stress and anxiety. Parents sometimes compare it to a bottle of pop that gets shaken up throughout the day as the child copes with daily challenges and then finally the bottle will explode. Anger and aggressive outbursts are all too common in children on the autism spectrum but there are ways in which parents can help.

Firstly try the “bottom of the iceberg” ideas to limit the stresses your child copes with each day

Secondly have a “meltdown plan” so that you know how you (and those around you) are going to respond when an outburst happens; ensuring you stay as calm as possible and making sure you, your child and any other children remain safe. Thirdly work with your child when they are calm and responsive on strategies to help them control their emotions.

There are a number of strategies that can help children and young people to control their emotions, using ways of working that we know children on the autism spectrum respond well to; structure and visuals.

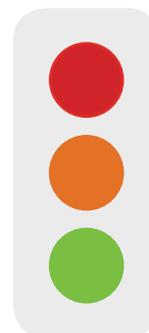
## Traffic lights

The simplest strategy which works well with young children is the traffic light approach.

Make a small card with a picture of traffic lights (red, amber, green). You can draw one or download an image from the internet.

Talk to your child about how they will use the colours to indicate how stressed they are eg.

Red – I’m really stressed/angry  
Amber – I’m getting stressed/angry  
Green – I’m ok



# Understanding and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours

Encourage your child to use the card to tell you how they are feeling at different times throughout the day. When your child uses the traffic light card praise him/her and then help him/her to get stress levels down by one of the following -

- Removing from the stressful situation
- Distraction with a special toy/special interest
- Relaxation techniques that you know work with your child (deep breathing, massage etc)

## Five point scale

5	I run out of the room
4	I hit other people
3	I swear
2	I'm quiet but mad and tense
1	I'm feeling okay

## 5 point scales

The 5 point scale works on the same principle but with 5 stages. It helps children break down their stress levels further and over time helps them to regulate their emotions. It is a simple idea that works well with children on the autism spectrum. It can be used for any behaviour and more information can be found at:

<http://www.5pointscale.com/index.htm>

- Use a 1-5 scale grid (examples and downloads can be found on the 5 point scale website) to work with your child to rate their feelings of stress. Try and get them to think about how they feel at each 1-5 level. Your child will probably find this difficult at first so they will need your support – do they get hot? does their heart beat faster? how do they behave? do they start to argue? do they shout?
- Some children may like to draw pictures for each level, those who like role play can model facial expressions for you to take photos or they may identify cartoon characters or animals for each level.
- Once you have recorded how s/he looks/feels at the each level you can then talk about strategies to bring the levels down, explaining that 'thinking about a favourite toy' might work for level 3 (stressed) but it won't work for level 5 (lost control).
- When you have your scale chart make lots of copies and use it regularly. Encourage your child to tell you what level they are feeling at different points of the day and encourage them to use the strategy you have both identified for that level.
- A set of small individual 1-5 cards can be helpful so your child can show you a card when they are not able to tell you how they feel.

# Understanding and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours

## Emotional tool box

A further development of the same principle is Dr Tony Attwood's Emotional Tool Box. He identifies a whole range of tool that we use to help regulate our emotions:

- Physical Activity Tools
- Relaxation Tools
- Social Tools
- Solitude
- Thoughts and Perspectives
- Special Interests
- Sensory Tools
- Medication.

These all form part of our Emotional Tool Box. Identify one or two tools for your child in the above categories (e.g. trampolining might be one of their physical tools) and display visually; a chart with pictures or even a small box that represents a tool box with pictures or objects in it that represent each tool. Work with your child to produce an emotional thermometer, similar to the 5 point scale idea above but using a scale that is right for your child 1-5, 1-10. Linked to the points on the thermometer are what tools they could use from their emotional tool box.

If you are interested in finding out more about Tony Attwood and the Emotional Tool Box you will find notes from many of his conference talks posted on the internet.

Traffic lights, The 5 point Scale and Emotional Tool Box all work on the same principle –

- Break down the concept/behaviour
- Display visually
- Practice regularly

Your choice of method will depend on your child's age and level of understanding.

## Summary

- Behaviour difficulties are common in children on the autism spectrum
- It can help if you understand your child's behaviour in the context of their autism – difficulties in communication, social interaction, need for routine and sensory difficulties.
- Tackling difficult behaviours should be done in two ways
  - Helping your child cope with the stresses of every day life by using preparation and visual support and
  - Working with your child to target specific behaviours using behaviour diaries, reward systems and specific strategies such as traffic lights and scales.

Living with a child on the autism spectrum can be a daily struggle. Behaviours change over time, new behaviours develop and old behaviours can re-surface. But remember, where possible -

- Give time for yourself
- Don't blame yourself
- Get support (friends, family, support groups, professionals)