

Understanding Behaviour in Autistic Children

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

All behaviours have **triggers and functions** although it is not always easy to spot them with autistic children. Try to see the world from your child's perspective and look at the behaviour in the context of their **unique experiences every day**.

Insights gained from the **experiences of autistic individuals** are vital to listen to and can help us to understand why a child may be behaving the way that they do.

We will explore some areas where autistic individuals may experience differences and think about how these may relate to behaviour.

Differences in communication

Autistic children may be experiencing difficulties in communicating their needs or may not be able to express what they are feeling in a way that other people understand. This can be explained by the **double empathy** problem which argues that there can be difficulties in understanding between people who experience the world in different ways. The misunderstanding happens on both sides.

Autistic children 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 autistic children who have limited spoken language but the communication difficulties of an autistic child who uses speech can still be significant yet can sometimes be misunderstood and overlooked.

“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)

“Sometimes people think I am being rude when I ask direct questions, I asked a new member of staff ‘who are you?’ I didn’t have the processing to think to say, ‘Hi I’m Amy’. It can be hard for me to work out what someone may say next, direct questions give me exactly what I need.” (Amy Steed)

Need for Routine and difficulty with change

Autistic children can experience difficulties in thinking and behaving flexibly which can often result in a need for predictability and routine with an anxiety around change. Unfortunately, changes in their everyday lives are sometimes unavoidable; teachers are sometimes off sick, TV schedules may alter, and family plans may have to change. Dealing with change can lead to high levels of anxiety which can be displayed 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 differences

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 differences

Many autistic children are over or under sensitive to sensory stimuli. Situations where there are loud noises, strong smells or where there is close contact, such as crowded places, can be very stressful for them. Equally an autistic child may find quiet, stationary, visually muted environments difficult, and they may require more sensory input.

Children who are already experiencing high levels of anxiety due to the other difficulties mentioned above will find it even harder to cope with unhelpful levels of sensory stimuli.

“Loud and uncontrolled noises are annoying and can make me want to get away. Yucky strong smells like bananas make me gag!” (Isaac Hamilton)

Distressed behaviour

Distressed behaviour can include physically aggressive behaviour, but it can also include other behaviours that may have a negative effect on the person such as running away or hiding.

Sometimes the overload an autistic person experiences each day becomes unmanageable for them. They may show extremely distressed behaviour (**meltdown**) or partially or completely withdraw from the world around them (**shutdown**).

“When I shut down sometimes people think I’m “having a strop. It’s nice being trapped in your own body and the people that you love and often support you think you are choosing not to talk or pull away, or even just trying to stare at them.” (Amy Steed)

Produce a **‘safety plan’** with your autistic child so that you both know how you (and those around you) are going to respond when a meltdown or shutdown happens; ensuring you stay as calm as possible and making sure you, your child and any other children remain safe.

Noticing the build up signs

Different autistic children will have different build up signs that can help us identify when they are becoming de-regulated. These could include becoming hot, specific motor movements, becoming very still or quiet or becoming very vocal, talking to themselves or making particular noises. Work with your child to try and identify any of their unique signs.

Using the Iceberg Approach

If the behaviours, we see from an autistic child are seen as the tip of the iceberg then the differences mentioned previously can be seen as the large area of the iceberg underneath the water that we cannot see. Insert graphic.

Keep a record

Sometimes a simple **diary** where you record instances throughout the day can help you identify a pattern.

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**. Insert ABC graphic?

By recording in this way, you may find clues to the function of different behaviours. Some common functions include:

- Social attention and support
- To get something
- Escape or avoid something
- To meet sensory needs
- Communicate illness or pain
- To create predictability

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 think about and be realistic; you cannot work on everything at once. There may be some behaviours that you decide aren't really a problem, perhaps they upset you but are not really a problem for your child.
- Then from the list of other behaviours **decide what your autistic child wants to work on first**, this may not be the most extreme behaviour but the one with which you think you can best offer support for.

- **Is it the right time to work on things?** Be wary of trying to change things at times when your child is already coping with lots of change e.g. 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?** If certain behaviour always occurs when you are in the supermarket then shopping when your child is at school, a quieter time of day, or using the internet may be a good solution. It doesn't mean that you will always have to shop without your child, but it may be easier to tackle this another time and there is always a chance the behaviour may pass of its own accord.
- **Is your reaction or the reaction of others around your child making the behaviour worse?** Try changing your behaviour and see what happens. Autistic children often 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 reaction that will meet their need. 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.

Support strategies.

Provide structure and predictability in your child's life.

Use appropriate visuals. Most of us benefit from using visual methods of learning. Many of us rely on calendars, shopping lists and apps to get us through each day. Autistic children often 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 e.g. a morning routine. This could use photos or clip art pictures or be a written check list.
- **First and next charts**. Children 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 to give social information.

Some may need photos of the actual item (e.g. their cup or their bed), others will prefer photos from the internet, clip art images or line drawings. Older children and teenagers sometimes reject picture charts as too simple 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.

Using the Low arousal approach

Low arousal focuses on encouraging calm in stressful situations. Helpful strategies include:

- **Reduce the demands** made on your child.
- **Adapt the sensory environment.**

- **Regulate your own emotions.** Adopt calm body language and avoid saying things that will further upset your child at this time.
- **Listen and validate** your child's emotions.
- **Debrief at a later stage** with your child to try and understand what happened and why it occurred and how to minimise the chances of it happening again.

Importance of Recovery

Allow sufficient time for the child to calm down in a safe environment with a low demand activity.

Developing emotional understanding and regulation

Interoception is the ability to sense what is going on inside of our body. It can help us know how we are feeling both physically and emotionally.

Autistic individuals can often find interoceptive awareness difficult and so can find it hard to recognise and respond to the information their body is giving them about their emotions.

An autistic child may find it difficult to recognise, describe and explain the emotions they are feeling. Often strategies that are used to support autistic children assume that they can label the emotion and then respond with a suitable strategy to regulate that emotion. If an autistic child is finding this especially hard then it may be useful to work at helping them to identify what their body is feeling like and using body check ins or body scanning. E.g. What does your tummy feel like? Do you feel hot or cold? Interoceptive awareness needs to be developed before emotional regulation skills can have an impact.

There are several strategies that can help autistic children to understand and manage their emotions.

- **Zones of regulation.** Organises feelings into 4 coloured zones and helps people learn how to regulate the zone they are in. (Further information can be found in the resource list)

Supplementary Reproducible E for Elementary Ages

THE
ZONES OF
REGULATION™

The **ZONES** of Regulation

			
Blue Zone Sad Bored Tired Sick	Green Zone Happy Focused Calm Proud	Yellow Zone Worried Frustrated Silly Excited	Red Zone overjoyed/Elated Panicked Angry Terrified

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Adapted from *The Zones of Regulation 2-Storybook Set* | Available at www.socialthinking.com

- **The 5-point scale** helps children break down their stress levels and over time helps them to regulate their emotions.

	How do I feel	How it may look	What helps
5	I can't control myself. I feel scared and mad and like I will explode. Rapid or uncontrolled breathing.	I might scream, cry, hit myself or others, throw things, run away.	Find a calm, quiet space. Keep me and other people safe.
4	I am angry. I feel hot, my heart is racing, I am sweating.	I'm starting to lose control. I'm worried I may say or do things that hurt people.	Remove stressors from environment.
3	I may feel frustrated or excited. I am starting to get overwhelmed. I might feel sick, have a headache.	I'm a little out of control. I may be fidgeting and restless. Pacing, chewy, increase in stimming.	Do something I like that helps me to feel calm. Think about changing environment to reduce stress
2	I may feel worried or start getting distracted.	Something's bothering me.	Tell an adult how I feel.
1	I feel good.	I am relaxed and calm and able to engage in activities.	Now is the time to talk about feelings.

Use a 1-5 scale grid 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? What do they do? Do they shout? Do they hide? 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 choose meaningful colours for each level.

Once you have recorded how they look/feel at 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.

- **Emotional toolbox.** A further development of the same principle is Dr Tony Attwood's Emotional Toolbox. He identifies a whole range of tools that we use to help regulate our emotions.
- Physical Activity Tools
- Relaxation Tools
- Social Tools
- Solitude Thoughts and Perspectives
- Special Interests
- Sensory Tools

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 toolbox 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 toolbox.

Developing self-advocacy

It is important for your child to be developing confidence and abilities in advocating for their own needs. Helping them to have access to communication systems that work for them personally and for them to understand and know their own needs, so that they can communicate these needs and the support needed with people around them is key.

Recommended resources

<https://reachoutasc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/My-Anxiety-Toolbox-emotional-regulation.pdf>

<https://zonesofregulation.com/>

<https://www.5pointscale.com/>

<https://www.kelly-mahler.com/>

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1F08_T0UgPVvi3v69_fkSlavcoSV9rk1c/view

<https://www.studio3.org/>

Youtube - Low Arousal with Bo Hejlskov Elven

***Managing family meltdown: The Low Arousal Approach and Autism
by Linda Woodcock and Andrea Page***

The explosive child by Ross Greene

Sulky, Rowdy, Rude? by Bo Hejlskov Elven

Calming the chaos by Dayna Abraham