



## Autism and Behaviours that Challenge

**Behaviour that challenges** can be a consequence of the child having 'an intense response to overwhelming situations. It happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be expressed verbally (e.g. shouting, screaming, crying), physically (e.g. kicking, lashing out, biting) or in both ways, while some children may shut down and withdraw completely. Children with autism may also appear to behave unusually. There will generally be a reason for this: it can be an attempt to communicate, or a way of coping with a situation that they find challenging. Knowing what causes challenging behaviour can help you to develop ways of dealing with it.

**Sensory Differences** Many people on the autism spectrum have difficulty processing everyday sensory information. Any of the senses may be over- or under-sensitive, or both, at different times. These sensory differences can affect behaviour and can have a profound effect on a person's life. A person who struggles to deal with everyday sensory information can experience sensory overload, or information overload. Too much information can cause stress, anxiety, and possibly physical pain. This can result in withdrawal, challenging behaviour or meltdown.

**Obsessions, repetitive behaviour and routines** can be a source of enjoyment for autistic people and a way of coping with everyday life. These can provide structure, order and predictability, and help people cope with the uncertainties of daily life: give someone a way to start conversations and feel more self-assured in social situations: help someone to relax and feel happy.

**Anxiety** is a real difficulty for many children on the autism spectrum. It can affect a person psychologically and if a child is experiencing anxiety it can result in some or all of the following: - easily losing patience; difficulty concentrating; thinking constantly about the worst outcome; difficulty sleeping; depression and becoming preoccupied with or obsessive about one subject.

**Change and Transitions** Children with autism can find any kind of change difficult, as well as putting what is going to happen in a day in a logical order in their mind. Abstract concepts such as time aren't easy to understand, and children with autism may find it hard to wait. You may find that behavioural difficulties occur more in transition times between activities.

1. Identify the behaviour's purpose, all behaviour has a purpose, it can be a way of communicating needs and feelings.
2. If it is sudden or new behaviour – rule out any medical or dental issues first, particularly if behaviour has started suddenly and become more intense. The person may feel unwell, tired, hungry, thirsty or uncomfortable. Aggression may be also be due to adolescent hormonal changes.
3. Children with autism can be very sensitive to subtle changes in their environment. If there's a sudden change in behaviour, think about whether there has been a recent change in the environment.
4. Communication - Speak clearly and precisely using short sentences. By limiting your communication, the person is less likely to feel overloaded by information and more likely to be able to process what you say. Children with autism often find it easier to process visual information. Support the person to communicate their wants, needs and physical pain or discomfort.
5. Praise and reward - Many children with autism don't understand the connection between their behaviour and a punishment. Punishment won't help the person to understand what you do want or help to teach any new skills. Using rewards and motivators can help to encourage a particular behaviour or a new coping strategy. Even if the behaviour or task is very short, if it is followed by lots of praise and a reward, the person can feel positive about their behaviour, coping strategy or skill.
6. Consider the impact of social situations - Understanding and relating to other people, and taking part in everyday family and social life can be harder if you have autism. Do you need to build in breaks or are there specific communication skills you need your child to learn.
7. Manage change and transition times - It's important to prepare the child in advance for what the change is likely to involve. Using visuals whether it's a written list or drawings on a post it, can help the child understand what is happening and how their day will continue.
8. Offer a safe space or 'time out' A safe space, or time out can be a way to calm down, especially if environmental factors, such as flickering lights, are causing distress. This could be in a familiar place, like their bedroom, or doing a calming activity.

9. Build in relaxation – Your child might find engaging in their special interest or favourite activity relaxing, but not being able to do their favourite activity when they want to can be the cause of behavioural difficulties. Build opportunities for relaxation, and engaging in favourite activities, into the daily routine.
10. More information can be found on the [National Autistic Society and Cornwall Autism Spectrum Team webpages](#).