





Understanding Behaviour for kids with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)



Where to start?

- **Find out what will work for each child and family.** *All kids, including kids with ASD, are unique, so a one size fits all approach to behaviour won't work.*
- **Start with what is working well and build from there.** *Figure out your child's strengths, likes and interests as these will be super useful when addressing any challenges.*
- **Work out what a behaviour is communicating.** *Become a detective... Why is it there? What does it achieve? Unless we know this, we won't be able to fix any problems.*




Although all kids are different, there are some similarities that many, but not all, kids with ASD share, so it is useful be aware of them in case they are impacting on your child's behaviour/learning.

Potential communication challenges...

Challenge	Clarification/example	Strategies	
Processing words	The more we try to explain, the harder it becomes to understand.	Use 'visuals' (photos, video footage, modelling) that shows what is going to happen or what needs to be done. Reduce your words and allow processing time (up to 30 seconds of silence might be needed). Try singing instead of talking.	
Take things literally	If you say, 'hop into bed' they might think they have to hop, not walk, to bed.	Say exactly what you mean and/or use visuals (photos, gestures, modelling).	
Find understanding sarcasm extremely hard, or impossible	They just can't 'get' the double meaning.	Avoid sarcasm or explain it if you can.	
Find the word 'no' challenging	They have a meltdown most times you say "no" to something they want.	Say 'no' without using the word 'no' e.g. 'can I have iPad time?' 'Yes, you can tomorrow' instead of 'no, you've had enough for today'.	




Don't know, or can't tell us, how they are feeling	Some kids who look angry are actually worried.	Be a detective; look for miscues (see tip sheet). Help kids learn what their body signals are telling them about how they are feeling and what emotions/feelings are.	
Think differently	They say, 'You are a liar!', which sounds rude to you but actually you said something that wasn't 100% accurate, which they interpret as lying.	Before assuming your child is 'naughty' check that it isn't that their understanding is different from yours.	

Potential social challenges...



Challenge	Clarification/example	Strategies	
Fitting in with other people	They don't understand that other people see the world differently from them; it is all about their agenda and compromise is hard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the DIR floor time approach to build real social understanding. 	
Understanding other people's nonverbal cues (body language, gestures)	You give a 'warning glare' which they interpret as you are showing interest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use explicit/direct teaching (e.g. about body language, non-verbal cues, emotions). 	
Reading "unwritten" social cues	Knowing about people's personal space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use social stories. Attend social skill groups (formal or informal) to practice skill development. 	
Understand the 'grey' areas of human interaction	Will try to simplify by categorizing people, e.g. as either 'good/likeable' or 'bad/not likeable'. Once a category has been made they can find it hard to change and that person will		

	always be a 'bad' person, regardless of how nice they are on other occasions.	
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Potential sensory challenges...

Challenge	Clarification/example	Strategies	
Have difficulty processing information from their senses	May underreact e.g. they don't appear to register pain. Or they may overreact e.g. hating wind, noise, busy places, tags on clothes, having their hair washed or cut.	Work out what sensations are calming, exciting, overwhelming etc. Use this to help manage their behaviour e.g. reduce noise by wearing earmuffs when shopping. See an Occupational Therapist (OT).	
Affected by 'sensory build up'	Small triggers that add up and then result in a huge meltdown which looks like it happened for no reason.	Look at what has been happening over the last week to see what the small triggers might be. Get help from an OT.	
Hard to combine sensory input	Can't look and listen. You may notice this when they look away from you when you talk.	Don't make them combine two senses e.g. let them look away when they are listening. Work with an OT.	

Potential change/transition/perfectionism challenges...

Challenge	Clarification/example	Strategies	
Find coping with change super hard	Will have a meltdown if you drive a different way than normal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life is full of change, so we need to gently help kids with ASD learn to cope with change. 	
Find it very hard to start an activity but once they start, they are ok to continue	Will resist doing homework but once they start they are happy to finish.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We need to support them to cope, so they don't become overwhelmed, rather than 	




Find moving from one activity to another (transitioning) hard	They don't want to go to have a shower but then don't want to get out of the shower.	<p>avoiding all change.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See tip sheets 'flipped lids', 'name it' and 'calming sensory'.
Find coping with things not being perfect/making mistakes difficult	They try to write but make a mistake which 'ruins everything' which in turn leads to a meltdown.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use timers, visuals, advanced notice, social stories, a choice of two things, or a choice wheel to give some control.
Have very rigid thinking	Expecting things will always go the way they have planned.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a "first this, then that" approach with the second activity being something they want to do.
Try to make their world predictable	Always want to be in control and try to dictate what happens or use repetition e.g. watching the same tv program, listening to the same book.	




Special interests/different forms of play, many kids with ASD...

Challenge	Clarification/example	Strategies	
Have special interests, something they find fascinating	For example, knowing the train timetable. Some special interests can be so absorbing that kids will stop connecting with their community.	<p>Try using special interests to motivate kids to try things they find hard or are reluctant to do.</p> <p>Use special interests to build social connection and competency e.g. they are the only person in their class who knows the bus timetable so everyone asks for their help</p> <p>We need to gently break into their world, build connection and then help them join our world too.</p>	

Use toys in a different way	Line cars up rather than pretending to drive them.	<p>Use a DIR floortime approach to enter their world (See your key worker).</p> <p>Use a first this, then special interest time. Rather than trying to stop a behaviour, think about what you can replace it with – what skill needs building or what other interest can be developed?</p>	
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Stimming, many kids with ASD...

Challenge	Clarification/example	Strategies	
Make repetitive actions/body movements/sounds when they are excited, overwhelmed, tired or trying to calm down - sometimes called 'stimming'	e.g. flapping hands, watching fans spin, tapping.	As they are often a way of de-stressing, don't try to get rid of them. If they occur too frequently or are not appropriate, modify them e.g. redirect to another activity or to a more socially acceptable behaviour.	

If you want more detail/info then these are some useful approaches/websites/people to look up: *Positive Partnerships, DIR Floortime, Tony Attwood, Sue Larkey, Raising Children.*

And remember as Temple Grandin says autism is, "different and not less."

If you need a pick me up, perhaps remembering some famous people who had Autism will help:

Mozart, Einstein, Sir Isaac Newton,
Bill Gates, Satoshi Tajiri (the creator of Pokémon),
Andy Warhol, Picasso and many, many more...