

## Information Sheet

# Creating a Positive Environment for the Individual with an Autism Spectrum Disorder

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The following article provides basic skills for developing a positive environment for the individual with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. It is aimed at the individual, families, and professionals to help in the understanding and impact of environmental factors.

### General Guidelines

Ensure where possible that the environment for the individual with an ASD provides:

- Predictability
- Meaningful communication
- Manageability

Use the following points to help you set up a positive environment:

- If you are prepared for the individual, it is much easier to avoid problems and avoiding problems is far easier than trying to fix them after they occur.
- Help the individual understand their strengths and how to work on their weaknesses.
- Set up the environment in a way that facilitates communication and reduces frustration.
- Help individuals compensate for difficulties they may encounter or experience.
- Become aware of ways in which we need to modify our own behaviour.

- Impose expectations which are realistic and achievable.
- Acknowledge that there will be tough moments! Try to remember that the child with Autism Spectrum Disorder is probably not trying to be difficult. The world is very confusing for them and their attempts to navigate it can cause frustration for them and you.
- Aim to teach the individual strategies for independent functioning.



### Essential components in supporting an individual with ASD

**1. Structure:** rules, schedules, time tables, checklists, task-based activities, and concise questioning all help provide a structured environment that will aid decision making and task focus.

**2. Meaningful communication:** sometimes words can be very difficult for individual with an ASD as they tend to be visual thinkers. Augmentative communication systems such

as signs, picture cards and “situational narratives” can assist in getting your message across. If unsure, check that what you have communicated has been understood. Use Who, What, When, Where, and How to establish context.

**3. Predictability:** variety is not usually the spice of life for individuals with ASDs. Change must be introduced in a clear and concrete manner, and constant reassurance should be given. The individuals’ ability to generalise skills from one environment to another may not be well-developed, so do not assume a learned skill will be transferred (or punish the individual for failing to transfer skills). Prepare the individual. Give warning of change – tell the individual what will be happening next, and what they will be expecting to do when finishing and starting activities/tasks.

**4. Manageability:** it is important for individuals with an ASD that tasks are broken down into manageable steps with realistic goals. Be aware that individuals’ behavior usually has a purpose, so look for the motivation, incentive, or reward that is available to them. Teach the individual an appropriate way to ask for help. Praise successful outcomes. Be mindful of individuals stress indicators. Teach ways to express or indicate feelings, so you can prompt appropriate action before an outburst or episode of withdrawal.

**5. Positive Support:** individuals with an ASD can have low self-esteem, so it is important they feel supported. It is more effective to use a reward system for good behavior (i.e. stars), rather one for bad behavior (i.e. cross’s), and modify language to suit this (eg “I’d love to see how well you can hold my hand” not “You must hold my hand!”). Reinforce all the attempts at positive communication. It is easy to focus on

negative communications but we often ignore or fail to acknowledge positive attempts.

#### **6. Mutual Trust:**

individuals with ASDs need to trust the people who are helping them interpret their environment. Showing respect for individuals and confidence in your ability can help the person feel more comfortable in the environment.



### Helpful hints

- Provide a predictable environment and routine – a routine board or daily calendar can be helpful to establish this.
- Prepare the individual for changes in advance
- Where possible introduce changes gradually and with visual information
- Use visuals to aid comprehension
- Make instructions brief and concrete
- Use everyday situations to teach appropriate behaviour
- Encourage and praise appropriate behaviour, pairing this praise with an immediate reward if necessary
- Use obsessions/preferred activities as rewards if more acceptable rewards fail to motivate
- As difficult as it may be, remaining consistent, persistent and calm is your best tactic. Allow yourself some time to build up these skills, but do remember that competing with the noise level of an individual in a tantrum mode by yelling rarely works.
- Allow the individual some “downtime” upon returning home from school or

other socially and sensory demanding activities. This downtime may be organising a favourite activity or simply allowing them to watch television or stay inside their room.

- As consistency is very important to the overall success of strategies, try to make sure that all significant adults or older siblings are aware of any new rules, strategies and consequences for your child, so that your child is well supported and will not become too confused.
- As a last word, remember that often when a new strategy is put in place, behaviour may get worse before it improves. This may be because your child resists or is uncomfortable with change in general, or because they simply want their own way! Really try to **weather the storm** and persist with your strategies and goals and remember that if you give in during a tantrum your child will understand that their strategy (ie the tantrum) has been successful.



Information obtained from the Association for Children with a Disability (2010), Through the Maze: An overview of Services and Support for Parents for Children with a Disability in Victoria. [www.acd.org.au](http://www.acd.org.au)

