

Behaviour support strategies for people on the autism spectrum

Behaviours of concern

Some people on the autism spectrum may engage in behaviours that are concerning. You don't have to be a behavioural expert to understand behaviours of concern – you just need to be patient and understanding.

Where to start

Start by making a list of concerning behaviours and choose one or two to work on first. If you choose more than two behaviours it will be difficult for you to be consistent.



The next step is to figure out what is causing that behaviour (the function). It is also important to look at what happens immediately after the behavior (the consequences). Often this is the reason why the behaviour keeps happening. A simple way to find these patterns is to use a "STAR Chart".

Example Star chart:

Date/Time	Setting	Triggers	Action	Response
	<i>Where? Who was there and what was happening</i>	<i>What happened immediately before?</i>	<i>What did the person do?</i>	<i>What happened then?</i>

You can make a record of behaviours using a STAR Chart in writing or in your mobile phone. By keeping records over days or weeks you should see a pattern and might find what events cause the behaviour. These events are called potential triggers.

Once you are aware of the potential triggers of a concerning behaviour you can take steps to either avoid those triggers, slowly desensitise the person to those things or teach an alternative skill.

Your records might also show that there are consequences that are accidentally rewarding the person. If this is the case then you can change these consequences.

The next step is to determine the function the behaviour is serving for the person

Behaviours of concern shown by people on the autism spectrum always serve a purpose, the key is finding that purpose.

Here is a list of common reasons for behaviours:

- Communication
- Attention or other positive reinforcement
- Reduction of frustration or stress
- Escape from demands
- Lack of understanding
- Sensory stimulation
- Loss of control

Once you know what the purpose of the behaviour is you can try to find another option. For example, if a behavior of concern is providing sensory stimulation then you can choose another behaviour which will provide the same sensory input.

This new behavior can be taught to the person by breaking it into simple steps, and using visual aids. The goal is to teach the person to replace the behaviour of concern with the new behavior.

A reward system can help to motivate the person on the spectrum to learn and use the new behaviour. A good reward is one that the person values and doesn't normally have access to, for example, special stickers or extra ipad time. Give the reward when the person has tried to use the new behaviour, has been successful in using the new behaviour and hasn't used the behavior of concern.

Example: Your child bites his hand when in the supermarket; you have assessed that supermarkets make him anxious due to the overwhelming sensory input (trigger). Once the hand biting (behaviour) begins you usually get out of the supermarket as quickly as you can (consequence). The consequence (you leaving the supermarket in a hurry) is actually reinforcing the hand biting behaviour because the child has learnt that if he bites his hand you will take him away from the offending environment. The hand biting is behaviour.

You may decide to teach the child a more acceptable

form of relaxation, such as deep breathing, rubbing his hands, or thinking of a favourite object or activity. possibly achieving two functions - lower stress levels and oral stimulation.

You could also teach him to bite on something else (soft toy, teething ring, piece of fabric) instead of his hand. You can use role-play, photos, and other visual methods to teach the child the new relaxation method and to bite the new object instead of his hand.

Teaching alternative skills and behaviours is best during calm times, not when the person is feeling anxious. Over time the person should become familiar with the new skills and behaviours and when to use them. At this stage you can start to use the strategies in everyday situations.

At first you may need to observe the child closely for any signs of anxiety. Use the relaxation method and have the object ready to pre-empt the hand being bitten. Reward the child when he tries the new behaviour. As the child becomes independent in this behaviour, he/she can self-manage.



Any behavioural strategy must be used consistently each time the behaviour happens, and must be used by everyone that has contact with the child. It's also important to be patient as it can take days, weeks or even months before you get results.

Here are some other useful strategies for parenting and teaching styles:

Helpful hints

- Provide a predictable environment and routine. A visual schedule or daily calendar can be helpful to establish this.
- Prepare and plan for changes in advance. Where possible introduce changes gradually and with visual information.
- Use visuals to aid comprehension.
- Make instructions brief and concrete.
- Use teachable moments in everyday situations to teach new behaviours.
- Encourage and praise positive behaviour, pairing this praise with an immediate reward if necessary.
- Use interests/preferred activities as rewards.
- Differentiate between odd behaviours and those that are interrupt learning.
- Remain consistent, persistent and calm. Remember that most parents and carers struggle with this! Allow yourself some time to

build up these skills, but do remember that competing with the noise level of the person on the spectrum in a tantrum mode by yelling rarely works.

- Allow the autistic person 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
- Ensure that all significant people are aware of any new rules or strategies so that the autistic person is well supported and won't become too confused. Consistency is the key to success.

Remember that often when a new strategy is put in place behaviour may get worse before it improves. Keep in mind that this is normal and persist with your strategies and goals.

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