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Supporting the behaviour of children with autism

A guide to supporting the behaviour of children with autism within schools

Children with autism may present behaviour that appears unusual and at times can be disruptive to theirs and others learning. It is important to remember that this may be the child's way of trying to communicate with you or coping with a situation.

Prior to the student joining your class, it is essential to meet with their family/ carers to get to know the child: their likes/ dislikes, skills, the types of communication they prefer to use, what they find challenging and what strategies the parents/ carers find work.

The way an individual with autism behaves can often appear unusual however this can often be a means of communicating or coping with a particular situation, for example if the child is exposed to triggers such as bright light or loud sounds they may respond by humming loudly and putting their hands over their ears, trying to get away from the stimuli, rocking, shouting. Each child is different so it is vital to build a picture of them so you can best support them in the classroom.

If your student is experiencing difficulties in managing their behaviour, and you have already ensured you have provision for communicating effectively with them, addressed any potential triggers e.g. not sitting the child next to the window, avoiding bright light; have resources to support their learning and developed an Individual Learning Plan to identify how you will support them to learn within the classroom then you might want to consider meeting with their parents/ carers along with the child to develop a behaviour plan.

[Click here to find out more about Behavioural Policy Plans .](#)

Tips for supporting an individual with autism through times of change, social situations, unstructured time and sensory challenges

- **Consider the sensory environment within your school**

Having met with your student and their family/ carers for an initial meeting you will have a knowledge and understanding of what environmental triggers they experience. Use this information to plan your classroom set up, how you deliver teaching and the resources you use. Many children with ASD will have difficulty in processing sensory information, some may find background noise, movement and light difficult, even painful whilst others may be drawn to sensory stimuli.

If you have noticed a sudden change in behaviour, do consider whether there has been an environment change such as tables or chairs moving, a new wall display as children with autism are particularly sensitive to environmental change.

- **Be patient and realistic**

If your student is finding it difficult to manage their behaviour, it is important to remember that they are not being "naughty" or "disobedient", their behaviour is a sign of communication or a way for them to try to cope with a situation.

Track their behaviour in a daily diary and monitor. Be realistic and set achievable goals. If there is more than one behaviour, try to focus on one at a time.

Be patient, the behaviour will not change over night and you may experience setbacks.

- **Be consistent**

If after monitoring their behaviour, you find patterns arrange to meet with the student and their parents/ carers to develop a behaviour plan. It's important that everyone involved has a consistent approach to the behaviour and regularly discusses how strategies are progressing.

- **Encourage and support good communication**

Some children with autism experience difficulties in communication, being understood by others, understanding what is being said to

them, interpreting facial expressions and body language. A child with autism may appear to be unable to manage their behaviour when in fact it could be a sign that they are experiencing frustration and anxiety due to communication difficulties. Even children with autism who have strong communication skills may struggle in conveying emotions.

- Be concise. Keep sentences short. Speak clearly and precisely.
- Use visual aids, symbols, objects, pictures, social stories. PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) offers a range of accessible pictures and symbols which work well with children who experience communication difficulties. [Click here for more information about PECS](#). visit:

- **Supporting children to understand and express emotions**

For many children with autism, understanding emotions and showing emotions is an abstract concept and therefore difficult. To support children with autism, understand and participate in abstract concepts, turn it into something concrete using visual aids. For example, you could use a traffic light to represent Green- Happy, Amber- a bit worried/ upset, Red- upset/ angry or a large-scale model of a thermometer.

To support the child to understand what emotions feel like, use social stories such as "When I am angry it makes my tummy and head hurt/ I get a red face/ I want to cry". This will also help them start to identify when their emotions are changing such as when they start to feel angry.

When the child can understand when they are starting to feel angry, it gives them more control to manage their behaviour and they can start to use the strategies you have introduced to calm themselves down.

Brain in Hand offers an App that children can use to manage their anxiety. Visit the Brain in Hand website to find out more - <http://braininhand.co.uk>

- **Give praise and reward**

It is important to note that many children with autism will not understand the connection between their behaviour and punishment. Behaviour is another abstract concept so as with emotions, try to make the abstract more concrete using visual aids, symbols and social stories.

Praise and rewards, even for a small task or new coping strategy can help your student feel positive about their behaviour and will encourage them. Ensure your praise and reward is immediate so that it is meaningful.

- **Support social interaction**

Social interaction can be more difficult for children with autism as it is unpredictable and abstract. Some children may find it daunting and present certain behaviours to avoid it. Situations that may present as difficult for children with autism include:

- Playtimes (try to establish a buddy system so they are not alone at play time and offer a quiet space they can go to with some toys and books that relate to their interests),
- Changes in the school calendar - e.g. sports day (Offer a quiet area with toys and books with the child, offer transition support leading up to the event so they know what to expect, when and how the environment will change- use pictures to explain and allow the child to keep these as reference)
- A visitor comes to the class or a class field trip (Prepare your student ahead so they know what to expect, assign someone to support them).

- **Supporting change**

Children with autism find change difficult and change, even temporary change outside of school can impact on a child's behaviour in school. It is therefore essential to maintain good relationships with families/ carers and ensure there is ongoing communication so they can let you know if there is any expected change at home such as a new sibling, redecoration of a room, a new car or even unexpected such as having to take a different route to school in the morning. Equally, if you can let families/ carers know ahead of any changes at school they can support you to enable their child to make the transition. Changes in school might include altering the order of lessons for the day, changing the seating layout of the room, changing class displays, moving from one activity to the next. If you are planning to make changes at school, work with your students so they know what to expect. Depending on your student's needs and how well they respond, you could involve them in helping you make the changes.

On a day to day basis, a day planner that is visual and can be seen by the class is useful in helping your student understand the sequence of the day. Your other students will enjoy this too.

Autistic people can find it difficult to cope with change, whether a temporary change such as needing to drive a different way to school due to roadworks, a more permanent change such as [moving house](#), or the change from one activity to another.

- **Calm time**

Children with autism may have a toy or activity they appear to be obsessed with. Not allowing them to have the toy or participate in the activity can be a trigger for behaviour. When planning lessons for the day, build in time for their favourite toy or activity indicating this on their plan so they can identify when.

Using relaxation with your student will help reduce their anxiety and manage their behaviour. A relaxation space and time to relax each day will also benefit the whole class.

To find out more about supporting a child with autism with their behaviour visit: <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour.aspx>

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