

## Information Sheet

# Behaviour Management Strategies for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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**It would come as no surprise to many that the most frequently asked questions of our staff relate to understanding the behaviour of children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. This article has been prepared to help you understand your “ABC”.**

The behavioural challenges that are present when caring for a person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder can often feel overwhelming. Most people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder display a variety of behaviours that can seem odd or extreme: however, it is extremely important that you try to make sense of the behaviour which helps you make sense of the Autism Spectrum Disorder.



You don't have to be a behavioural expert to manage problematic behaviours – you just need the basic strategies, a good understanding and plenty of determination and patience!

It is also a good idea to make a list of problematic behaviours and prioritise one or two that will be addressed first. Trying to work on more than one or two things will result in spreading yourself too thinly and will decrease your ability to be 100% consistent across the target behaviours.

1. The first step in tackling a problematic behaviour is to figure out what is causing that behaviour. In behaviourist terms this is referred to as the “antecedent”. It is also important to look at what the consequences of the behaviour are, i.e. what happens immediately after the behaviour. Often the consequences are the reason why the behaviour continues to occur. A simple way to determine these patterns is to use an “ABC Chart” as illustrated at the start of page 2. Keeping a record over a period of days or weeks should identify a pattern to the events that are causing the behaviour to occur. Once you are aware of the potential triggers of an undesirable behaviour you can take steps to either avoid those triggers or slowly desensitise the person to those things. Similarly, if you have identified consequences that are inadvertently rewarding the person then you can make a determined effort to change these consequences.

### Antecedent → Behaviour → Consequence

Date/ Time	What happened before the behaviour began?	Describe the behaviour	What did you do in response to the behaviour?	What happened then?

2. The next step is to determine the function the behaviour is serving for the person. Behaviours displayed by persons with an Autism Spectrum Disorder always serve a purpose, the trick is finding out what that purpose is. Here is a list of common reasons for behaviours:
  - Communication – I’m tired, I’m confused, I don’t like this, help!
  - Attention or other positive reinforcement
  - Reduction of frustration or stress
  - Escape from demands
  - Lack of understanding
  - Sensory stimulation
  - Loss of control
3. Once you know what purpose the behaviour is fulfilling you can set about trying to find a more appropriate alternative. For example, if an undesirable behaviour is providing sensory stimulation then an alternative behaviour can be selected which will provide the same input for the child but be more appropriate.
4. By breaking the alternative behaviour down into simple steps, and using visual aids as a teaching tool, you can teach the person to engage in the alternative behaviour instead of the inappropriate behaviour.

5. By using a reward system, which incorporates a highly desired item, the child will be more motivated to learn the new skill and use it when necessary. Reward should occur when the person has attempted to use the alternative, has been successful in using the alternative and in the absence of the inappropriate behaviour.

How does this work? A common example would be the child who bites his hand when in the supermarket:

You have assessed that supermarkets make him anxious due to the overwhelming sensory input (antecedent). 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.



So, following the above suggestions:

The hand biting is possibly achieving two functions - a reduction in stress levels and oral stimulation (functions of the behaviour). So 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. You could also teach him to bite on a more appropriate object (soft toy, teething ring, piece of fabric) instead of his hand (appropriate

alternative). You can use role-play, photos, and other visual methods to teach the child the new relaxation method and to bite the object instead of his hand.

This teaching should be carried out during calm times, not when the child is feeling anxious. Eventually the child should become familiar with the new methods and when to use them, once this has occurred you can begin to use the strategies in actual situations. Initially you may need to observe the child closely for any signs of anxiety. Implement the relaxation and have the object ready to pre-empt the hand being bitten. You should reward the child when he has tried to comply with this technique. As the child becomes independent in this technique you can move the responsibility for relaxation and carrying the biting object onto the child (by using a carry pouch or an object which easily fits in his pocket).

In addition to finding an alternative to hand biting, you should also look for ways to desensitise the child to the antecedent (in this case the sensory issues). You could start by only taking the child to the supermarket when you have one or two items to buy, so you know you will only be there for a short time. If there are auditory sensitivities you can use earplugs or headphones to reduce these. If there are visual sensitivities then the child can wear a cap to dim the brightness of fluorescent lights and reduce the amount of visual input. If there are sensitivities to smell then try to avoid the toiletries and pet food isles. If the child copes well with these periods then there should be a reward as soon as you get back to the car. This could be a favourite book or toy, or a trip to McDonald's on the way home! You could also use a social story to explain to the child what might happen during the trip to the supermarket, as well as what the reward will be once the trip is complete.

Any behavioural strategy must be implemented consistently each time the behaviour occurs, and must be used by each individual that has contact with the child. It is also important to be patient as this process may take several days, weeks or even

months before results are apparent. Here are some other useful strategies to incorporate into parenting and teaching styles:

### Helpful hints

- Provide a predictable environment and routine – a routine board or daily calendar can be helpful to establish this.
- Prepare the child for changes in advance
- Where possible introduce changes gradually and with visual information
- Use visuals to aid comprehension
- Make instructions brief and concrete
- Incidental teaching - 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
- Differentiate between odd behaviours and those that are interrupt learning
- As difficult as it may be, remaining consistent, persistent and calm is your best tactic. However remember that most parents struggle with this aspect of parenting! Allow yourself some time to build up these parenting skills, but do remember that competing with the noise level of child in a tantrum mode by yelling rarely works.
- Allow your child 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 (eg a tantrum) has been successful.



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