



A Practical Approach  
at Home for Parents  
and Carers

# Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Children with Disabilities Team  
Occupational Therapy



**Falkirk Council**  
*Housing & Social Work Services*

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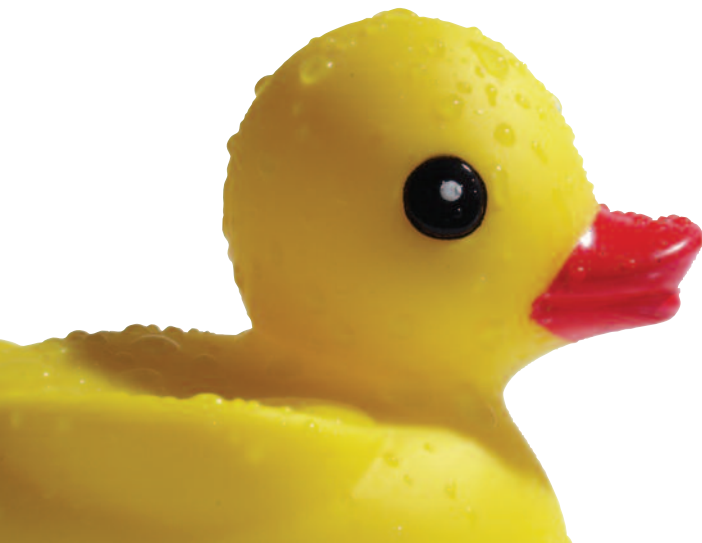
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The background of the entire page is a photograph of a clear blue sky with scattered white clouds. The clouds are more concentrated towards the bottom of the frame, creating a sense of depth and openness.

# Creating a Supportive Environment

# 1. Understanding Autistic Spectrum Disorder and the Importance of Creating a Supportive Environment

**People with Autism Spectrum Disorder are part of a distinctive group with common characteristics. In order to assist individuals to learn and develop, it is crucial that those around them understand Autistic Spectrum Disorder and assist the individual to develop by providing structured teaching. This includes organising the physical environment and developing schedules and work systems which incorporate the use of visual material to make expectations clear and explicit.**

With regard to the physical environment, people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder perceive the world differently and many have difficulties making sense out of a lot of details.

People with Autistic Spectrum Disorder first of all see the detail, and then try to get the meaning. It is therefore necessary to adapt the environment to suit each individual, to ensure that everything abstract (vague or theoretical e.g the concept of time) is made concrete and to ensure that structured teaching is carried out in the appropriate context.

If too much stimulation (something that produces a reaction/response) is available, people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder are unable to grasp the meaning, particularly if stimuli change all the time. Consistency in the environment, approaches and positive routines may assist the young person to cope with daily living.

When adapting the environment, it is important to clear work areas/rooms of any unnecessary stimuli in order to allow the individual to understand the task and focus on what is expected of him.

## Some children with ASD may:

- Have a need for consistency of approach and for environment and routines to remain unchanged.
- Need flexibility to be specifically introduced.
- Need visual supportive environment encouraged.
- Have difficulty knowing how to spend time if it is unstructured.
- Have difficulty understanding the need for social interaction.
- Find it difficult to play imaginatively, e.g. use toys as objects.
- Exhibit unusual or repetitive behaviours, such as spinning and head banging.
- Have sensory processing difficulties which lead to an extremely high tolerance to heat and/or pain.
- Be over sensitive and become overwhelmed by the noises of equipment or other people, smells and visual stimulation.
- Not be aware of the consequences of actions or of danger.
- Dislike going in a car and adaptive equipment may need to be considered in order to keep the child safe.
- Have gross or fine motor difficulties e.g. find it difficult to manipulate objects.

People with Autistic Spectrum Disorder first of all see the detail, and then try to get the meaning.

## 2. Advice Strategies for Parents and Carers of Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder

**Sensory information from their body and environment may not be processed accurately for a child who has an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Information from all the senses, e.g. touch, taste, smell as well as planned physical movement requires to be organised to do tasks successfully.**

Performing self care tasks involves a series of complex processes, such as sequencing, motor planning and body awareness, for example toothpaste has to be put on the brush before it enters your mouth. Other areas also have to be considered: adequate attention levels are required if the activity is to be achieved and sensitivities to tactile experiences have to be overcome, e.g. from clothes and towels.

Children who have an Autistic Spectrum Disorder may not be able to adapt to their environment, therefore changes may have to be made for them to maximise their potential. These changes will be applicable at home, in nursery school, school and any other environment in which the child spends a substantial period of time. The following are suggestions of possible strategies and are split into sensory and general strategies. Each child is an individual and the strategy which works for one may not work for another. Parents often know 'at a glance' which strategies will work for their child, but the Occupational Therapist will be happy to advise if required.

## Activities of Daily Living

### Dressing

#### **Sensory:**

- Use comfortable clothes, consider type of fabric and length of sleeves.
- If the child cannot tolerate labels, cut them out.
- If the child cannot tolerate seams, undergarments can be worn to reduce friction.
- Try washing and drying clothes in unscented products.
- Dressing can be done in front of a mirror so as to provide visual cues to assist with sequencing, motor planning and body awareness.
- Be aware of other visual or auditory noises in the room which may be off-putting.

#### **General:**

- Practice dressing skills at home when there is plenty of time to complete the activity.
- Choose shoes with velcro or add velcro to button backs and zips.
- Organise drawers and put a picture label, if necessary, in front to enable the child to choose their own clothes.
- If the child has balance difficulties, try dressing sitting down.
- Play with dolls or teddy bears that require to be dressed to practise skills.
- Grade the activity so that the parent does some and the child does some.
- A dressing chart with pictures may assist to sequence the activity.



## Personal Hygiene

### Sensory:

- Use non-perfumed soap.
- Be aware of bathroom lighting levels and minimise any noises, e.g. run the bath prior to entering the bathroom.
- Use pressure when shampooing or drying with a towel.
- Before bath time, do activities that provide deep touch input, for example, resting your hands on your child's shoulders and applying moderate pressure.
- Make the transition from undressing and getting into the bath as quick and smooth as possible.
- If the child dislikes having his face or body washed, encourage him to wash himself. Self-initiated touch produces a less defensive reaction.
- Use a large sponge or loofah sponge. Rub firmly to decrease defensiveness.
- If the child is showering, use a hand held shower nozzle. Let the child control the direction and force of the water.
- Use a large towel, and quickly and firmly wrap the child in it. Avoid exposure of the wet skin to the air: the light touch may trigger a defensive reaction.
- Provide deep-touch using a towel to the head, hands and feet to decrease defensiveness. If the child will tolerate it, provide a firm massage, using lotion to avoid skin irritation.

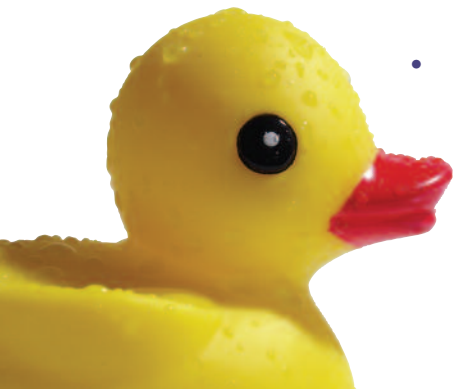


## General:

- Where the choice is available, allow your child to choose a bath or a shower. (A larger showerhead is often more acceptable to the child, as it distributes the water more evenly)
- Try to incorporate bathing into a play activity, for example use floating toys and bubbles.
- Talk to your child and explain every step, particularly when you are going to touch them with soap or a towel.
- Visual aids can be used in order to help your child understand the activity.
- Consider adaptive equipment that may make the task easier, for example a grab rail may offer more support getting in/out the bath.

## Hair - Grooming Cutting Washing

- Seat the child firmly on your knee and squeeze the child firmly between your knees (deep pressure).
- Place your hands on top of your child's head and exert gently but constant pressure down.
- Use a firm stroke or pressure as you comb or wash your child's hair.
- Count or have the child count as you comb, wash, rinse or cut the hair.
- Give definite time limits to the task e.g. let's count to 10, then we will stop cutting your hair, provide deep pressure immediately after. (see above)
- Break the task into small steps and eliminate any unnecessary steps or stages. Practise each step in isolation in a stress-free environment.
- Gradually combine these steps and perform the task in the natural environment.



## Toileting

### Sensory:

- The child may be sensitive to toilet tissue, try using moist toilet roll.
- Consider visual and auditory stimulation around and keep it to a minimum.

### General:

- Visual aids can be used to explain task.
- Consider adaptive equipment, would an extra rail or infant chair be beneficial.

## Eating

### Sensory:

- Certain textures may be avoided by the child.
- Play imitation games with tongue, lips and cheeks.
- Weighted cutlery may give an increase in sensory feedback so as to make the child more aware of the appropriate movement.
- Give the child a personal stereo to wear with calming music, this may make it more tolerable for them to sit at the table.
- Before meal times, provide deep touch and total body exercises to decrease touch defensiveness.
- Try to make mealtimes a relaxed, pleasurable experience. It may not be useful to introduce new challenges at meal times.
- Try to limit the number of new foods introduced at any one time.
- Set aside a separate time for graded feeding programmes to remediate the underlying problem.

### General:

- Try cutlery that is in a particular colour or theme to create interest.
- Try plates and cutlery with words on them to associate to task.
- Try playing with foodstuffs at separate times, e.g cheese building blocks, vegetable monsters.

## Oral Challenges

Eating non-foodstuffs, biting hands, chewing and/or regurgitating and similar behaviours are often encountered. Psychologists may be able to advise on ways to extinguish these behaviours. There may be a sensory element contributing to the development of these behaviours which an occupational therapist may assess for, in this case the following strategies may be helpful: (See also touch challenges, social and emotional environment)

- Redirect the need to bite to a more positive sensory activity i.e. chewy toys, crunchy foodstuffs.
- Substitute another item for the hand that is readily available e.g. wristband of suitable robust material.
- Provide a range of oral experiences throughout the day e.g. hot, sour, sweet, salty, cold, different textures.
- Try electric toothbrushes in a tooth brushing routine.
- Include some sensory toys as part of daily routine e.g. vibrating snake.
- Incorporate a weekly session in a multi-sensory room where possible, or consider incorporating sensory equipment into young person's room design.
- Redesigning own home and garden reduces the amount of supervision required.

## Sleeping

### Sensory:

- Develop a calming routine before bedtime. Encourage quiet activities.
- Use a heavy/weighted blanket or flannel sheets to provide deep-pressure and a calming environment.
- Use older fashioned layers of blankets rather than duvets.
- Try using tight sleeping bag.
- Check visually all bed spreads for too much detail or colour.
- Check all bed linen for texture and smell i.e. conditioners, washing powder etc. may irritate.



## Hand Function

Many young people with ASD have difficulties with hand function. Specific assessment and remedial activities can be accessed via Primary Care Children's Occupational Therapy Service, however the following may be useful to carry out at home.

### **Fine hand play activities.**

#### **When a child only uses finger tips:**

- Before activities, provide deep pressure into the palms of the hands, such as firm clapping or full press-ups or half press-ups.
- Carry heavy bags or boxes.
- Grade activities by using the fingertips then moving to use the whole hand. If the child will tolerate it, provide deep-touch input over the hand and writing tool, i.e. hand over hand squeezing.

#### **When a child avoids getting hands dirty:**

- Encourage less messy activities.
- Use tools to manipulate the supplies whenever possible (for example, a paintbrush rather than finger paint).
- Use messy materials that provide resistance, such as putties or dough mixtures.
- Lucky Dips – hiding items in different dried goods

#### **When a child 'fiddles' with objects:**

Your Occupational Therapist will help you to decide if this is caused by a sensory problem. If so, you could try:

- Small fidget toys e.g koosh balls, magnetic stones, water snakes.
- Finding the child's own sensory preference and creatively incorporating this into a play activity, e.g. sensory waistcoat, stuffed toy, etc..

## Adapting Environments

### Inside

Developing a routine and a consistent way of doing things can reduce the impact of their difficulty with language or attention. Organisation can give the child a sense of control in how they plan their day.

#### **Sensory:**

- Provide a place where the child can take themselves for time out, for example a small tent or cabin bed. Children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder often find dark and enclosed spaces calming.
- Avoid visual and auditory stimulation.
- If the child has a positive response to movement try a rocking horse or chair swing.
- Paint the child's room soft, pastel colours and put dark blinds or lined curtains on windows to prevent light distracting the child.
- If possible, situate the child's room in a quiet corner of your house.
- Give your child "heavy" tasks around the house, for example carrying the shopping, arranging tins on shelves. This may have a calming and organising effect.
- Provide a three sided work station in order to reduce distractions. The child can do homework or other activities in this area.
- Activities such as vacuuming may be better kept for when the child is not around.

#### **General:**

- Label cupboards in the kitchen or bathroom with pictures so that the child knows where to find things.
- Minimise clutter.
- Try using a diary or photo book with familiar pictures, such as school buildings, family members, to ease the transition to different situations.
- Sharing a bedroom with a sibling can be difficult. Clear boundaries maybe helpful.

- Try to structure the child's time and consider introducing an 'activity schedule'.
- Provide a range of favourite toys that can be played with independently for short times, e.g. jigsaws, trains, cars.
- Store toys/equipment in closed containers which can be moved to a designated area when it is time to move to another environment/activity e.g. from playtime to bathtime.
- Consider clearly marking a work area at nursery/school.

## Outside

Playground equipment can be used at home, and school or in the local park or leisure centre to provide an area where a child can play and have time out. Accessing local facilities may be more suitable at less popular times to reduce noise levels and distractions. Play areas that have clearly defined boundaries may be preferable. The following pieces of equipment can help the child to interpret sensory information and make it more meaningful.

- Swing, therapy balls, mini-trampoline or space hoppers for movement.
- Sand and water pits for tactile experiences.
- Play house or tent to provide a safe and calming area.
- Small sheds.
- Whenever possible, consider additional planning for special events such as firework displays, birthday parties, football matches. Is there a quick exit route if the young person becomes stressed? Is there a special toy/routine/contact that can be used to calm the young person?

## Noisy Public Environments

- Consider when to carry out everyday activities. Is there a less busy supermarket, or off-peak time? Is there a quiet space available e.g. dining booth?
- Consider having the child wear snug clothing e.g. lycra undergarments.
- Consider having the child wear earplugs.
- Consider using a music player with headphones, allowing the child to listen to favourite songs/music. This may help to drown out environmental noises and help the child stay focused on an activity.

## Walking

- Try providing deep pressure on the bottom of the feet, before commencing. Seat the child firmly on your lap facing a wall. Place the child's feet flat against the wall and put pressure directly through the knees into the feet. Have the child help push.
- Have a clear route that can be described, or use pictures of your route.
- Have a clear timescale – e.g. we are going on a 10 minute walk round the pond.
- Consider if a buggy is required for longer distances.
- Consider taking a toy along in your/their pocket.

## Garden Creativity

The garden can provide positive experience to give a young person calming times, time alone or with friends. Time to 'let off steam' is essential to all young people but especially people with ASD. It can be planned to meet individual needs unique to the child and their family.

An assessment can be done by an Occupational Therapist to look at this with families.

A number of positive distraction techniques in the garden for young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder can be discussed with an Occupational Therapist by families who wish to design a garden or buy outdoor toys. Where Local Authority are assisting a family with a safe play area general garden safety should be considered and addressed by the family.



Falkirk Council Social Work Services - Community Service has an interest in assisting in garden development. If parents wish to enlist assistance with design and practical manual work this can be arranged via the Local Authority Occupational Therapist.

Although funding for practical ideas which families may feel beneficial in the garden is not available, many charities will support this for families and applications/referrals can be made by the occupational

### **Some of the following may be helpful to consider:-**

- Creating sensory areas - small safe hidden areas or use of garden sheds with suitable toys can create a calming experience.
- Large climbing frames, trampolines, chutes and swings may give the young person the experiences of movement they need.
- The dislikes, likes, motivations and pleasures can be carefully looked at to give a unique experience which a young person can have in their garden environment which is vital to family life and support at home.
- Night lighting, gazebos and sheds allow the experiences not to be curtailed by weather or the dark.
- Small water features can be extremely calming or give something to distract when things are difficult for a child. Likewise, small wind chimes, musical chimes, light reflector toys or spinning toys may be both aesthetic and enjoyable.

**The garden may be an area where, as a family, a shared experience with a young person can take place or simply be pleasurable for the rest of the family as a calm, quiet area.**



## Functional Communication to Access the Environment

**Young people will benefit from visual schedules for the day. These may be pictorial, symbolic or object reference based. Sometimes a sensory element to this can be helpful, particularly if the young person has an accompanying severe learning disability. This is crucial in the home or other environment. The child in school should be using this.**

### **It may:-**

- help the young people predict what will happen
- support spoken instruction regarding transitions
- provide a constant reminder
- support their understanding of the sequence of events
- introduce new activities in the context of familiar activities
- introduce planned change to their daily/weekly routines
- support the young person's independence

Young people  
will benefit  
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### **It should be used when:-**

- The young person needs structure
- The young person struggles to self-occupy
- The young person has limited sense of his/her day
- The young person needs help to predict or organise his day
- The young person needs to know what is expected of them.

## **It can be carried out simply in the home by:-**

- Choosing the visual system e.g. concrete objects, photographs, symbols, written word - this can be with advice from the Speech & Language Therapist
- Organising and sequencing timetables, before the start of the day/evening
- Keeping the timetable in a recognisable place for each young person
- Keeping the timetable portable. When the young person makes any physical transitions, help them retrieve their timetable
- Reviewing daily timetable at start of each day/evening, with each young person
- Employing 'Point-Say-Do' principle for each activity on the timetable
- Actively showing and reinforcing when each activity is finished by turning over the symbol/ticking the word/putting the object in the 'finished' box
- Gradually fading your physical/gestural prompting, allowing them to develop their responsibility to use and learn from their timetable
- Using the timetable to emphasise clear beginnings and ends to activities

Creating a  
Supportive Play  
Environment at Home



## Play In The Home

Playing at home is something all children do as part of growing up. Sometimes this play is done alone, sometimes with siblings, friends, relatives or parents. It can be planned or spontaneous. It can involve the whole family. Play is often the occupation of children at home. It happens so spontaneously families do not notice it or how it happens. Children with ASD need help to learn to play. Often for them it is a skill to learn, as are other skills such as dressing. Often families need to understand play from their child's world.

### Children with ASD may:

- Need their play time structured.
- Need a routine to play similar to other daily task routines.
- Need to be taught the rules in detail.
- Enjoy playing in different ways, which families need to understand and value.
- Need someone playing alongside if they are to begin to notice another person.
- Be distracted by a lot of detail or sensory difficulties.
- Need encouraged to extend from only one activity or occupation by introducing a second play experience for short periods, over time.
- Need only one sensory channel to attend to at a time e.g. something to see only or something to listen to or something to smell etc.
- Need communication in play at an appropriate level.
- Need no more than a few toys presented at a time.

**Play for most children regularly includes toys. Children with ASD often have difficulty playing appropriately with toys.**

## **Children with ASD may:-**

- Have set ways of playing with a toy which needs help to change.
- Not be motivated by toys.
- Become overloaded with too many toys.
- Have difficulty jointly playing with toys with another person.
- Easily break toys when first interest has gone.
- Have difficulty with imagination playing with toys.
- Require toys to be limited in detail i.e. plain, not patterns.
- Require toys which are easily built or have few small parts due to co ordination challenges.
- Prefer toys most like real items i.e. pan or phone like a real one.
- Need adults to value motivating “toys” even if they do not seem like a toy to the adult e.g. flapping a ribbon or ripping paper.

## **Play Environment**

Play, both indoors and in the garden, needs to be an environment with careful safety checks on toys and location. Any possible sensory overload needs to be looked at in the environment. Play in the garden needs times when an adult supports. This encourages joint play but also stops a young person becoming too isolated or withdrawn. Play needs to motivate a child. Often motivation is the challenge to young people on the Autistic Spectrum. Familiar layouts need to be available to relax a young person enough to engage in the serious business of play.

The following may be helpful to try:-

## Bedroom

- Structured play.
- Reduce clutter to a minimum.
- Boxed and labelled toys.
- Change toys or boxes available in a routine.
- Consider creating a “den” in a pop-up tent or cabin bed area with enjoyable activities.
- Consider aromatherapy at bed time or other helpful routine if smell is a motivator.
- Consider colour and décor of room.
- Consider visual daily routine, including play, on bedroom wall.
- Use large cardboard box with lots of different ideas inside e.g. tactile box.

## Family Area

- Have activities in a box your child likes to take out and explore as a family or with one other family member.
- Have a box for special visits i.e. “gran’s” box.
- Have 2 duplicate boxes with the same things in each plus a toy that joins with each section in a different box e.g. wooden train track in one box, train in the other.

## Outside

**Large play equipment - try out swings, climbing frame, trampolines etc. before you buy to see if your child enjoys certain experiences - often certain movements are very motivating for a child.**

## Garden Activities

- see Garden Ideas

Water - small features, small paddling pools, water pistol, water spray toys are all very helpful to play with your child.

Sand - Try keeping sand to a small amount and dry as it can be quite overloading for some children.

## Family Times in the Home

Sometimes looking at unusual sensory activities such as 'foot spas' for everyone to try out at home seems unusual but may be a good way of being together on an activity.

Trying different music together or with cards with happy or sad faces if you like or the child likes the music.

Rough and tumble for all - try using large balls or space hoppers to reduce the amount of time adults have to take the weight of everyone i.e piggy-backs.

## Toy Challenges /Reinforcers

Split in your mind activities which reinforce and motivate your child (these would be activities they would voluntarily engage in) and activities that challenge and they would not normally initiate themselves or keep up playing without help.

Use reinforcers after a short period of challenging play.


Reinforcers could be spinning lids, lining up toys, bubbles, light tubes, ripping paper, edible rewards such as raisins, crisps, chocolate.



## Play challenges you may encounter, with ideas for you to consider:-

Play Challenges	Ideas
Only play with one activity again and again	Try introducing a second one before it for only 1-2 seconds then on the next occasion increase the time. Try introducing something else at the same time then gradually do it on its own first e.g. music with rough and tumble play.
Does not play with any toys	Box them up and only leave out one or two which they will play with. Get two of them and play alongside with the child in the routine they do with the toy e.g. spinning the car wheels. If it is only self play - do the thing too e.g. flicking fingers or flapping. See the item they like as "toys" e.g. ribbon.
Only notices part of toy	Get second one and you do the action then vary it slightly to include another part.
Times when they are not able to focus on any toy	Consider keeping box of motivating favourite toys separate for this time e.g. wind chimes, windmills, light vibrating toys etc in a box
Only likes one piece of music	Try introducing new music at a different time/place i.e. in bath time routine or on a different CD player.
Hates table top games	Keep it to only a few seconds. Consider visual schedule with favourite activity straight after.
New toys are played with rigidly one way	Don't give a new toy to be explored until you play with the toy and the young person in a structured session.



A collection of colorful LEGO bricks in yellow, green, blue, and red, scattered on a light blue surface. The bricks are of various sizes and are arranged in a way that suggests they are being used to build something. The lighting is soft, creating gentle shadows on the surface.

Creating a  
Social Family  
Environment

## The Social and Emotional Environment

Research shows that a child with ASD can cause a great deal of extra stress in family life, particularly for mothers, and over holiday times. Families may benefit from support from services and their extended family to help them meet these challenges.

Siblings require support and time with their parents and may also benefit from support from other services.

Respite, befriending and young carers support groups all give space and time to families. The home environment however can be designed to allow families to get the best out of their time together.

### **The following are practical, environmental supports might be helpful:-**

- Co-ordinating services where possible so that the choice is not either/or but both e.g.. respite and play schemes. Planning in advance with school dates and service providers giving the most family friendly package.
- Help to co-ordinate and plan schedules in the most appropriate visual format can be provided. These are often used in school but are seldom available for families to use at home. If this support works well in one environment, it can be used to support the young person in all environments.
- Planning family routines to include time with activities for each person, different combinations of family members and as a family may help bring predictability for the young person.
- Planning in advance special events, either social or of more practical or care needs e.g. shopping, hairdresser etc.

Keeping a diary of any challenging incidents can help identify trigger times or situations.

- When planning play experiences either with parents, siblings, extended family or carers play boxes with individual, liked toys may be helpful.
- Using choice in small things may be helpful in preventing difficulties in daily life tasks e.g. a choice of blue or red face cloth, the green or blue toothbrush today. This may also help build in flexibility.
- Using emotion cards to display how someone is feeling may help families not only express how they feel but get the message across.
- Planning "free" or "down" time for a young person. Young people with ASD often do not cope well with unplanned time. To afford the family the opportunity to have this "down" time it can help to make a selection of choices available for the young person to self-select.
- Keeping a diary of any challenging incidents can help identify trigger times or situations directing alternative ways of doing something.
- Family life is not normally as structured as school. Many families feel that they would like this time to relax and not rely on fixed routines which resemble work. Children with ASD however, thrive on routine and it should be seen as a challenge to get the balance right. Achieving this for individual families means that everyone feels supported. Often professional support is helpful here to suggest a diversity of ideas.
- Returning home after a period of intense social concentration e.g. from school, is often a critically difficult time. Planning and thought to using this time is particularly important. It may be that carer support will be the most helpful at this time, or that the young person needs directed to an activity they particularly enjoy, or to use a quiet area.

Each family  
member needs  
time to relax

- Transitions between activities often does not seem relevant to the home environment. However, if transition cards, objects or counters are used elsewhere, this may be helpful also to reduce stress moving on to different times of the day within the home.
- The young person's bedroom is often a source of stress or a place of relaxation. Use of the bedroom during the day for activity can be planned and activities, toys and layout considered. Routines or changes in layout (e.g. tidying up in boxes at night) may help night to be different.
- Often more unusual routines begin due to children growing up and developing unique ways of managing their world. All these unique features need to be considered in the light of their developmental stage. The family may need support to help the child manage their world, to prevent unhelpful routines being established.
- Each family member needs time to relax. Parents often feel guilty taking time to care for themselves. It is essential that this time is taken to build a strength and inner support to be enabled to meet the care challenges. Often families need help realising and accepting this.

Response to physical touch can also affect emotional attachments in a family. Sometimes this is affected by the young person's ability to tolerate touch or need for touch. This can have great impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of the relationships with family and friends.

## The following may be helpful to consider to help improve physical tolerance:-

Touch Challenges	Suggested Strategies
Child withdraws or punches others who touch him lightly. Child reacts negatively and emotionally when touched lightly (exhibits anxiety, hostility or aggression).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teach others to touch the child firmly. Explain that the child feels light touch more strongly and as if he/she were being hit.</li><li>• Approach the child from within his/her visual field.</li><li>• Teach friends and relatives to show affection firmly and directly.</li></ul>
Child reacts negatively when touched from behind or when touched by others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tell the child when you are going to touch him/her. Always touch firmly. Assure the child that you will touch firmly and that you will not move your hands unpredictably.</li></ul>
Infant may prefer the father's firm touch over the mother's firm touch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tell the child what you will do and how you will do it. ("I'm going to hug you really hard."). Respect the child's need for control.</li></ul>
Child may pull away when approached for a friendly pat or caress from a relative or friend.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make kisses on the cheek a form of deep-touch input. Hold the child firmly and give a deep, firm kiss.</li></ul>
Child may reject touch altogether from anyone but his mother or primary care-giver.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teach people always to approach the child from the front and always make sure the child is able to anticipate the hug or expression of affection.</li></ul>
Self-stimulatory behaviours are often oral e.g. hand-biting, spitting and prompted by anxiety. This can deter other people from building relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide as much explanation of the situation as possible.</li><li>• Use of alternative oral stimulus e.g chewing gum, crunchy foodstuffs.</li></ul>

## Challenging Behaviour and Environment

**Often families are aware that many difficult times with their young child can be as a result of frustration, confusion, altered routine and poor communication. Supporting families to give a full home environmental assessment and alterations to day or building can still leave families with times when incidents of challenging behaviour can be displayed.**

Close liaison between all agencies is vital to support behaviour. However, the routine, environment or communication challenges can also be a vital part. In the home with each family's unique needs, likes, enjoyments and challenges the support should be ongoing and altered to suit these needs.

All the environments the young person is in should share experiences which might reduce the behaviour challenge in one or other environment.

With people on the autistic spectrum there is often an innate weakness in empathising with others' feelings, understanding their motivation and predicting others' behaviour. Specific features which help make life calmer like routines, time alone or rituals when anxious often clash with what is happening in family environments. Understanding that their behaviour is often communicating stress or anxiety or, perhaps, bewilderment at others' behaviour is difficult for a busy family to bear in mind.

Crisis situations when a child displays severely challenging behaviour or distress at home can affect the whole family. Support of Psychology and Psychiatry may be essential.

## Challenges may be supported in the home environment by looking at the behaviour at its different stages.

- Triggers - The cause of the situation. For young people with ASD it may involve their routine being interrupted, a sensory overload of sound or light etc., relating to too many people at once or a demanding situation which is difficult for the young person and where they cannot ask for help. Times of the day - like the return home from school.
- Escalation time - Sometimes the stress of socially interacting e.g. school, may mean that suddenly when a child returns home they lose control for a time. Other times a longer period of building up anxiety is a pattern and reading the signs at an early stage could prevent escalation.
- Crisis - A clear view of how families are going to handle the problem may need to be planned. Calm and consistent responses by families are hard but essential.
- Recovery - Time it takes and best method of achieving this needs clearly stated. It may be time alone or doing enjoyable activities needs to be in place.
- Discussion & Planning - Talking about the incident with the young person later may be best supported visually. Showing pictures of feelings displayed and looking at how things can be done differently may help the young person understand.

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Home Safety





## Home Safety – Family Responsibility

**Safe home environments are a priority for all parents. Families with young people with ASD often recognise the need to be even more vigilant about maintaining a safe home environment.**

Health Visitors can be contacted for general advice regarding safety by all families.

Other useful sources of information can be – Home Safety Officer based with the Fire Service, ROSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents).

### **House**

There are pieces of equipment families may feel are essential for general safety. Many high street stores have leaflets of their own that can provide a range of suggestions and ideas including safety catches for cupboards, washing machines, fridges, safety gates for stairs, plug safety caps, seat belt safety covers etc. Safety glass in furniture is also essential and families may wish to check this in their home environment. Promoting an

appropriate calming and safe environment is essential. Bearing in mind young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder are easily distracted by detail many families try to keep this detail to a minimum e.g. keeping to a plain rather than a patterned colour scheme. Often creativity is needed to make a home environment a clutter free environment e.g. using a toy box to signify end of play sessions. These examples can reduce anxiety and the potential for the young person to become highly aroused and stressed.

### **Garden**

As a safe play area is essential to all young people, this area requires good visual supervision to promote both the safety and developmental needs of young people.

Blind spots to supervision, dangerous objects in the garden, greenhouse glass and areas which can be climbed are all dangerous areas for families with young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder to address. Many young people feel insecure with a lot of detail in the garden or with inappropriate toys.

Positive experience of a safe play area as a place to calm them or to let off energy may not be achieved for the young person if these issues are not addressed.

A number of positive distraction techniques in the garden for young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder have been

mentioned and can be discussed with an Occupational Therapist by families who wish to design a garden or buy outdoor toys. Where Local Authority are assisting a family with a safe play area all of the above points should be considered and addressed .

## Home Safety – Occupational Therapy Support/Advice

**It is recognised many children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder require a level of support beyond normal levels of safety provided in a family home environment.**

Local Authority is aware of its increasing role in supporting families in the following areas which have been highlighted by parents and carers. Some practical solutions which have worked for others, where alternative strategies have not been successful, include:

- **Safe Play Areas** – An enclosed area where young people with good mobility are able to safely play, with supervision in a positive, distraction free environment.

This will either provide a calming effect or help young people let off energy and provide a form of respite to carers.

- **Safety in Cars** – Safe car seat provision for young people who are not aware of danger in the car but are not able to access standard car seating normally recommended.
- **Safety from Accessing Exits** (without supervision) - Safety locks, keyless locks and monitoring systems for families of young people who consistently are able to leave family home and are unaware of the dangers of environments outwith the house i.e. roads.

- **Safety from Access to Rooms and Cupboards** - Appropriate locks to rooms, cupboards when young people are unaware of the danger from items inside or may try to destroy them. Also where young people are unaware that rooms are out of bounds e.g. belong to a sibling. These locks require advice and support from the Fire Brigade to minimise risk of fire.
- **Safety from Water** – Various devices can be used, for young people with water obsessions, to prevent flooding when running sinks or baths. Thermostats can be used to control water temperatures for baths, showers, sinks etc.
- **Safety from Gas Cookers** – Isolation switches for gas cookers may be appropriate.
- **Night Safety** – when sleep strategies have failed to improve a young person's sleep pattern, then a safe space may have to be considered.

## Home Safety Risk Agreement

**There are some environmental risks which can be overcome, some that can be managed, and some that present an ongoing challenge.**

These may include general safety, kitchen hazards, obsessive behaviour difficulties, eating/mouthing objects, lack of awareness of danger as well as locks, fire safety plans, supervision levels.

For these reasons the Occupational Therapist will assist the family to identify risks, plan strategies and solutions and agree where the risk is ongoing, using a risk agreement. This can increase the families' confidence that they have considered all possible risks and solutions, and are offering the young person the best support available.

If you would like this information in another language, Braille, LARGE PRINT or audio please contact us.



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