



How to support preschool children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Behaviour Handling

What are the common behavioural problems in children with ASD?

Behavioural symptoms vary among children with ASD. The common ones include: repetitive and stereotyped behaviours; stubbornness; throwing tantrums over trivial matters; and being socially apathetic, passive or over passionate.

What attitude to be adopted when handling the behaviour of children with ASD?

Parents should have an open mind to accept their children's limitation. It is important to stay calm and handle challenging behaviours with a positive and proactive attitude. It is understandable that parents are concerned about their children's future, but over worry may not help! Instead, parents are encouraged to be receptive and grasp every opportunity for early training and intervention for their children.

Understand and accept the children as they are can help parents to coach them effectively with patience. Parents need to adjust their attitude, expectation and demand as they go along. It is essential that parents take good care of themselves with adequate rest and break amidst exhaustive childcare. Family support and understanding are also very important. In addition, parents can seek help from community sources, such as parents support group, to build up their support networks.



What are the basic steps when handling the behaviour of children with ASD?

- Begin with observing the behaviour to be handled
- Record details of the undesirable behaviour including where and when the behaviour happen and who is involved
- Analyse and find out the possible reason for such behaviour
- Identify possible handling strategies
- Choose a feasible strategy and implement consistently and persistently
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the handling strategy

In case of failure, review and repeat the above procedure of behavioural observation, recording, analysis, choose other handling strategy, then evaluate the effectiveness again.

What are the generic skills in handling the behaviour of children with ASD?

Some strategies are effective in handling children's misbehaviour. They include:

- **Reinforce appropriate behaviour:** Reinforce children's appropriate behaviour by giving immediate attention, acknowledgment, praise and reward.
- **Record and analyse the undesirable behaviour:** Parents may observe and record the details about the undesirable behaviour, e.g. the frequency, place and time that the behaviour occurs, as well as the consequence, what happen after the behaviour occurs, the people involved and their respective response and handling approaches.
- **Set clear and specific rules:** If children cry and scream for toy, parents can set up a clear rule in positive term, e.g. "Request politely, then you can get the toy".



- **Give reasonable consequences:** Children should not be given what they need if they just cry and scream. Instead, if they express their needs in an age appropriate way, their need will be fulfilled. (e.g. Children who cannot speak yet can make a palm-up gesture to indicate their request for a toy.) If children experience a reasonable consequence consistently, desirable behaviour will be positively reinforced and undesirable behaviour will be reduced.
- **Divert attention:** For younger children or children with weaker ability, parents can divert their attention to another activity that they are interested in before they behave inappropriately.
- **Execute planned ignoring:** When handling mild misbehaviours, such as talking back or making faces, parents can ignore children and do not pay attention to them until they stop the behaviour.

Effective behaviour management requires consistency in attitude and handling skills among all caregivers.

Children with ASD are more stubborn than their peers and are resistant to change of routines. Most of them may also have language problem. What specific strategy can be applied?

- **Make use of visual cues:** Most children with ASD are unable to express their needs effectively due to language difficulties. However, they usually have strength in learning through visual input. Therefore, parents may teach them how to express their needs with picture cards during behavioural training. For instance, if a child whines for toy, parents can teach him to show a picture card of the toy to express his need. This can help to reduce their undesirable behaviour. If a child has difficulties adapting to a new routine, parents may make picture card of the new routine and post it on a noticeable place, the child can then anticipate the change better with less undesirable behaviour.



- **Draw on their likes and dislikes:** Some children with ASD are strongly attracted to certain things such as toy buses, wheels, words and music. Parents may draw on their interests to reinforce or entice desirable behaviour during behavioural management or training. For example, if a child insists to press the lift buttons when he ride a lift, or else he will scream, parents may use his favourite toy bus to distract him from the lift buttons. When there are fewer people in lift, parents may use the toy bus as reward to teach him appropriate behaviour. During training, parents can arrange a 5 minutes break to let the child play with his favourite toy bus as a reward after 10-15 minutes of speech therapy.
- **Establish routines:** Children with ASD have difficulties adapting to new routines and environments. Therefore, setting a structured daily schedule helps bring in order and stability to their daily life. With more predicable routine, children will become calmer and throw less temper. It also helps them to better understand the demand at home and during learning.
- **Set expectation, be consistent and follow through:** Many parents cannot tolerate their children's stubborn behaviours and tantrums, thus yield to them in despair. To effectively handle the behaviour of children with ASD, parents can first observe and analyse the problem, then take corresponding action step by step with love, patience, faith and persistence.



Communication

Do all children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (“ASD”) have language problem?

Children with ASD always present with language and communication problems. Their intelligence and severity of ASD symptoms are directly related to their learning of language. Children with normal intelligence and milder symptoms usually learn to speak earlier. Some children with more severe symptoms cannot speak well and require alternative communication method, for example, using gestures or picture cards.

What are the characteristics of language development in children with ASD?

Children with ASD usually start talking late. Both their verbal comprehension and expression can be affected. When they start to talk, they may experience a longer stage of repeating others’ speech. They may need explicit teaching even for very simple communication needs. They may also talk in a flat or high pitched tone. Their language may improve with time, but they may still be weak in learning abstract and complex concepts, e.g. in understanding the intension of speech such as lies, jokes, and irony. Adjusting their speech according to the situation and audience is another area of communication difficulty.

How can I encourage my child to talk more?

- For children who have not yet started to talk, parents can encourage them to mimic some simple but interesting sounds, such as phone ringtones, door bells, vehicle sounds and animal sounds. Parents can also imitate sounds made by their children to get their attention. Whenever children attempt to imitate sound or speech, parents can praise them immediately to encourage more imitation despite inaccurate articulation. The reason children talk late is not because they are lazy, but it is because their language abilities are still developing. Parents should not force them to talk when they are not ready so as not to harm the parent-child relationship.



- Encourage children to express their needs, no matter it is a verbal or a gestural indication. Parents should not provide them with everything before they need too quickly before they make a request.
- When children cannot express clearly, parents can teach them some simple gestures such as patting themselves to mean “ me”, placing their palms up to indicate “give me” and shaking their heads for “no”.
- Language comprehension develop earlier than expression, which means children have to understand the words before they can say them. If children have no speech, parents may teach them common words and concepts, such as the correct names of familiar object and action words, and guide them to follow common commands in daily life. Interact and talk to children can boost their language comprehension which is fundamental for building up their vocabulary for future use.

What should parents do when their children start to talk?

Language learning is a gradual process. Children start to speak in single words first (e.g. object names like “train”, action words like “play”), then combined words and phrases (e.g. “play with a train”), then simple sentences (e.g. “Tommy is playing with a train”) and ask questions (e.g. “Where is my train?”), followed by description of cause-and-effect (e.g. “Tidy up after playing”) and more complicated sentences. As some children with ASD are good at imitating others’ speech, some parents may be tempted to ask them to repeat long sentences. In fact, children cannot actively produce these sentences unless they understand their meaning and are able to combine the words. Parents can teach their children to talk on a step by step basis according to their level of language ability so as to help them to build a strong foundation for language learning.



How can parents encourage their children to have eye contact with others?

Children with ASD usually avoid eye contact when they communicate with others. Parents can teach them to look at other's eyes during conversation and praise them immediately when they do so. First, parents can place the child's favourite toy in front of their eyes to get the child's attention, and encourage him to look at their eyes while looking at the toy. However, parents should not turn their children's head forcefully when talking to them as they may feel bad about it. They may also mistakenly think that this is the right way to make people listen to them and do the same to the others.

How to enhance children's social skills?

- Teach children the social rules, encourage them to take turns in games and share toys with others.
- Encourage children to observe what others like, dislike and their needs, and offer help to the others in time to enhance their social skills. For example, when father has finished his box of tea bag, mother can show the empty box to the child and go to buy a new box with him. When father gets the new box from the child, he can thank him for his kindness.
- Encourage children to pay attention to the emotion of themselves and others. Teach them emotion words such as happy, sad, mad and scared. Encourage them to express how they feel and state the reasons behind their feelings. Parents can also help children to learn more about emotions in daily activities and through storytelling and role-playing.



Play and Home-based Training

Why is play important to children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (“ASD”)?

As children with ASD suffer from communication and social difficulties, playing with them can help parents to communicate and build up strong relationship with them. Different types of play help promote children’s development in different areas, such as gross and fine motor skills, language and cognitive abilities. For children who are over or under-responsive to sensory stimulations (e.g. touch and vestibular stimulations), various play activities such as playing with toys of various textures and rocking horse, allow them to receive different sensory stimulation in appropriate way. These help to stabilize their emotion and promote their motor coordination. For children with narrow interests, play activities that incorporate diverse elements (e.g. construction toys and creative play) can broaden their interests.

What are the tips for parents when playing with their children?

- **Maintain a good mood:** Before playing with children, parents should first manage their own emotion and relax so that they can join in fully and enjoy the play.
- **Build on children’s interests and reactions:** Parents should understand their children’s development and follow their interest initially. Encourage them to play with different toys and try out different methods after the relationship has been built up. Children may need longer time to accept changes. Parents should not force them to do something that they are not interested as this may cause rejection or unpleasant experiences.
- **Respond actively:** Parents should respond to their children’s action and word wherever possible to foster communication. They should give more praise when appropriate so that the children will enjoy playing with them. During play, parents and children can build up better communication and relationship, and children can develop their potential in different areas.



How to help children acquire knowledge and skills systematically at home?

Play is not a process of systematic training. In order to achieve specific training objective, systematic and well-structured training can be conducted at home. Below are some of the points to note:

- **Set routines:** Parents can display the daily schedule in a place easily visible, e.g. in the living room, so that the children can know the schedule and better anticipate their activities like training time and playtime. This can make them more cooperative with their parents.
- **Use visual strategies:** When designing the daily schedule, parents can add photos, pictures, symbols or texts to facilitate their children's understanding. For instance, parents can take photos of the training set up (e.g. sitting at the desk), the training item (e.g. shape puzzles) and the reward upon completion (e.g. grapes for snack).
- **Create a proper environment:** Parents can find a quiet and tidy place at home, set up a desk and chair as training corner. Parents can sit next to or opposite to them so as to provide facilitation and to encourage eye contact.
- **Choose the right time:** Parents should choose a time when the children are more alert and parents have ample time to conduct the training (e.g. after dinner).
- **Set objective:** When setting objective of training, parents should start from those activities that meet children's abilities and interests, and progress from simple to complex ones.
- **Conduct training:** At the beginning, parents can break down the training into shorter sessions (e.g. a few minutes). As children's attention improves, the training time could be increased. Parents should start with easy and interesting tasks, then progress to more difficult and less interesting ones. Break down challenging and complicated tasks into smaller steps and train the children step by step. This helps boost their sense of accomplishment and motivation to learn.



- **Review and reward:** Parents should constantly review the training procedure and arrangement to ensure that they are appropriate for their objective. The reward should be attractive and adjusted according to children's preference. It is best to choose rewards that are practical and can be offered to the children immediately. In the long run, we hope that the children will motivate themselves by achieving the objectives and parents can reduce their rewards gradually.

Which one is more important, play or systematic home-based training?

Play is important to enhance parent-child communication and bonding. Different types of play also promote different skills. Play and systematic home-based training are complementary to each other. Parents should make suitable arrangement with respect to the characteristics of their children and home environment, so that children can learn and grow happily in various situations.



Eating Problems

Studies have shown that many children with ASD are highly selective about what they eat. For instance, they may only choose food of a certain texture, taste, smell, brand, packaging, shape, colour or temperature. Some of them even have unusual preferences with the presentation of food or the cutlery used. Other mealtime behavioural problems include food refusal, strict adherence to certain eating rituals, pica (ingestion of inedible substances such as soil and paper), rapid eating or prolonged pocketing of food in the mouth.

Generally speaking, children with ASD having eating problems may have the following key indicators:

1. Limited range of food textures: They often prefer food that is easy to chew or swallow.
2. Food selectivity: They usually eat no more than 30 types of food in total, including less than 10 types of fruits / vegetables, less than 10 types of protein and less than 10 types of grains / starches.
3. Longer mealtime: Some need at least 30 minutes to finish a meal, others spend over two hours eating every day.
4. Problematic behaviour during mealtime (e.g. throwing bowls or cutlery on the floor deliberately).
5. Children's unhealthy eating habits often cause enormous stress to their families.

Eating problems in children with ASD usually start at young age and may persist into adolescence. Some of them may become malnourished or overweight due to persistent selective eating patterns, which are largely attributed to their ASD conditions:

1. Weak oral-motor abilities: Many children with ASD have difficulty chewing, swallowing, as well as food manipulation problem.



2. Sensory processing problems: They are hypersensitive to the smell, taste and texture of food.
3. Rigid behaviour: They have specific preferences regarding when and where they eat, who feed them, as well as the types and appearance of food.
4. Environmental factors: Just like other children, children with ASD may also learn over time that being upset or angry allows them to get out of uncomfortable situations.

All parents want their children to eat well and stay healthy. Therefore, eating problems in children with ASD often cause their parents or caretakers great stress. Below are some strategies for parents and caretakers on how to handle such problems:

1. Record the type and amount of food that children eat and refuse to eat every day. Also, pay attention to their mealtime behaviour and any favourable factors that may encourage them to eat (e.g. they prefer to eat with a certain piece of cutlery).
2. Design a daily eating schedule which sets out the time, place and routine of each meal to help children to anticipate the changes with less uneasy feeling. If necessary, visual cues such as pictures may be provided to remind them of the upcoming events or changes in the routine (e.g. taking them to a new restaurant today). Alternatively, a familiar tune can also be played as a signal for children to prepare themselves for the transition.
3. To control and give proper amount of food and limit snacking between scheduled meals as this will lower their appetite and motivation to have their main meals or try new food.
4. Try to limit their mealtime to 15-30 minutes and clean up the table when time is up, so that children can shift to other activities.
5. Let children sit on a comfortable chair with footrest which provides sufficient support. Make sure they are sitting in an upright posture (provide cushion for support if necessary). The table top should be at the same level as their elbows.



6. Avoid watching television or mobile phones during mealtime to minimise the distraction and help children to focus on their meals.
7. Make food fun and let children play, explore and experiment with food, especially those food that they have never tried before.
8. There are three ways to help children grow accustomed to new food:
 - a. **Simultaneous presentation:** Mix the new food into their favourite dish, start with a small amount and increase the portion gradually until they are willing to eat the new food alone.
 - b. **Shaping of new eating behaviours:** Break down eating into multiple smaller steps (e.g. begin by encouraging children to look at the food, then smell it, touch it by hands, by lips, by tongue, and finally, eat it). Reward and praise successive steps until the new food is eaten and swallowed.
 - c. **Food chaining:** Food varies in appearance, smell, taste, shape, colour as well as texture. Introduce a new food and change only one sensory characteristics at a time (e.g. for children who love French fries, let them try baked fries, then baked wedges, and at last baked potatoes). Take each step patiently and keep trying.
9. Introduce new food in fun and familiar ways, such as playing games, stories reading or using their favourite cartoon characters.
10. Encourage positive behaviours by praising and giving immediate reward when they are willing to comply during mealtime or try new food.
11. Use movement or a little physical exercise to “wake up” their body and senses so as to increase their food intake.



12. Parents should have good eating habits themselves (e.g. not using mobile phones while eating) and serve as role model for their children. Show them pictures or videos of appropriate eating behaviour of other children or adults to encourage modelling.

Parents or caretakers should strive to set specific, reasonable and quantifiable goals – such as increasing the portion and diversifying the food types, or making their children more cooperative – and the execution should be consistent. Parents should regulate their own emotions and avoid being unduly anxious or impatient. These eating problems are common in children with ASD, and they are not a result of poor parenting. Helping children to establish good eating habits and broaden their food choice are not easy task. With patience and step-wise approach, the situation will always improve.

If your children’s eating problem is serious and persistent, you should seek help from professionals.



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