



How to support school-age children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Social Communication

While social difficulties are one of the core features of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), the presentation in each child may vary a lot. According to the academic literatures, there are roughly three forms of social interaction styles:

Lack of interest in social interaction

Unwilling or consider unnecessary to interact with their peers; tend to distance themselves from people; some may even resist being touched.

Lack of initiation of social interaction

Though willing to interact with their peers, they are relatively passive and lacking in social skills. However, once being led or invited by others, most of the time they will still participate in usual social activities.

Lack of “theory of mind” or social cognition

Though willing to actively interact with peers, they do not understand the proper social rules or social conventions, and some may be too enthusiastic in the interaction. This is why they are often considered socially awkward.



What are the social difficulties commonly encountered by children with ASD?

Low motivation for communication

Some children may have difficulty initiating social interaction, and in some scenarios, they even resist or avoid interactions. They lack motivation to share their experiences, and sometimes may not greet or respond to the others' approaches. As such, they seldom participate actively and usually avoid group activities.

Difficulty in understanding social rules

Despite having motivation to actively interact with people, some children lack proper social skills which are important for effective collaborations with peers. One of the reasons is that they are weak in understanding the common social rules and conventions, such as adjusting volume of voice according to different occasions, having proper table manners when dining with others, or keeping appropriate social distance with the person you are talking to according to the relationship with him or her. In addition, as they have difficulty understanding different kinds of relationship, they may overshare personal information with acquaintances, such as telling neighbours about private family matters which also causes embarrassment to their families.

Difficulty in recognizing or interpreting others' nonverbal expression and behavioural intentions

Misunderstanding often arises when some children do not recognize or aware of others' non-verbal expression (e.g. facial expressions, intonations, tones of voice and gestures) over communication. Furthermore, they tend to pick up only the literal part of the speech over the conversation, while ignoring the context and the background information in which the conversation is taking place. They cannot understand others' behavioural intention, sometimes they seem to be rather naïve and were blunt to the others. For instance, if someone, with a disdainful look and in a sarcastic voice (non-verbal communicative behaviour) says to the child, "You are really nice to others!" The child may take it as a compliment by mistake, not knowing that it is actually a complaint of his bad manner.



Difficulty in taking others' perspectives and feelings

Some children have difficulties in seeing things from the others' perspectives or understanding their feelings, they ignore the impact of their behaviour on the others or even hurt other's feelings. Eventually, they are being commented as self-centred or inconsiderate to the others.

How to improve their social and communication skills?

Create positive social experiences

For children who are less socially active, parents may first help them to build a stable circle of friends to increase their incentive to interact and to enhance their intrinsic motivation for social interaction. For example, they can start making friends with those who share similar interests as they do, which helps foster their engagement in social interaction. Gradually, they can develop friendship and enjoy the happiness and fulfilment from sharing and interacting with others.

Guide them to recognize and understand non-verbal expression

Parents can make use of random events in daily life to teach their children. Parents can start with teaching them to take note of the interests and needs of people around, and encourage them to share their observation. Parents can also suggest their children to observe carefully others' facial expression, intonation, tone of voice and gesture, and try to make inference from them. For instance, if someone stares at them and grouches, "Do give a try again if you dare..." he is not asking someone to repeat the action, but to stop it because he was annoyed. Parents can remind their children not to pick up only the literal part of speech but to make inference from the nonverbal expression as well. While teaching them the appropriate social responses, parents can coach them with specific examples (e.g. what exactly to say in that circumstance), guide them with demonstration and practice with them by rehearsal.



Enhance their social thinking skills

Parents can help their children to appreciate the different perspectives of different people, and to realize their behaviour could have affected others' feeling and impression on them. Given that they are weak in generalization, they may not know how to respond in similar situations even though they have been taught before. Therefore, parents are encouraged to get their children prepared for various similar social situations so that their analytical, comprehension and analogical skills can be strengthened. Parents can:

- Use daily situations to teach children on appropriate social behaviours and be practical.
- Make good use of the “social stories”, which helps to explain social situations in clear and systematic manner. “Social stories” are stories that delineate various social situations, in which they present detailed analysis of people’s thoughts, feelings, intentions, beliefs, opinions and responses while at the same time provide suggestions on appropriate social behaviours. With better understanding of social etiquettes and social conventions, they could effectively integrate into their social circles with confidence and ease.
- Read story books and watch cartoons or dramas with the children, guide them to observe and analyse the intentions, thoughts and feelings of the story characters and make inferences from them.



Behaviour

Behavioural problems of children with ASD can be caused by their symptoms of ASD or personal limitation. If parents are familiar with their children's character, temperament, abilities and personal preference, they can deduce the cause better. Furthermore, parents can observe carefully and record the "Antecedents" and the "Consequences" in relation to the behaviour-in-question in a clear and specific way. With these information, parents could try to figure out if their children's behavioural problems are reflecting their unspoken needs or difficulties. On the other hand, parents should also take note if their handling strategies have maintained or reinforced their problematic behaviours.

What are the common strategies to handle children's challenging behaviours?

Parents may take appropriate **environmental control** measures to address the "Antecedents", such as keeping children away from the triggering factors. Be **adequately prepared**, such as anticipating potential behavioural problem of children and plan feasible methods to tackle in advance. Set **ground rules** for children, communicate clearly with them in advance, teach and practise with them the appropriate behaviours.

If children are behaving well, parents can give **them positive attention, specific praise or rewards** to reinforce their desirable behaviour. If children misbehave, parents can let them bear the **logical consequences** and responsibilities (e.g. suspending their rewards or privileges for a short period of time until they behave properly again).

If the undesirable behaviours are relatively mild and do not lead to immediate danger (e.g. stomping on the ground or making noises deliberately), parents can use **planned ignoring**. Parents need to communicate and work closely with other family members to ensure everyone has the same expectation and adopts the same handling strategies.

Sometimes children's difficult behaviours are related to the frustration caused by their limitations or their difficulties in understanding instructions. In this situation, parents can teach and equip them with new skills and abilities to replace their problematic behaviours. With better abilities and skills, some of the difficult behaviours will subside. Parents could refer to the following tips to help their children to develop new skills:



- **Clear instructions and practical demonstrations:** Parents can give instructions in a gentle manner with adequate eye contact. The instructions should be clear and concise as well as in positive wordings, which should be given with respect to their developmental level. Practical demonstrations could also be beneficial.
- **Gentle reminders:** Parents can try to give gentle reminders when children fail to follow instructions due to forgetfulness.
- Teach children new skills by “**Ask, Say, Do**”. Parents can divide the new skills into several steps and guide children to learn the new skills by “Ask, Say, Do”. For example, when teaching children how to pack their schoolbags, parents can remind them the steps required, use guiding questions and then practise to solidify the skills. Parents can let them practise the new skills and praise their positive attitude and courage. Parents can demonstrate the correct steps again when children could not perform the new skills and give encouragement and support to them.
- **Drawing on their likes:** As some children with ASD are strongly attracted to certain specific things, parents can set up a reward scheme with their likes for reinforcing their good behaviour.

Are there any handling strategies designed specifically for children with ASD?

- **Visual strategies:** Parents can make use of pictures, flow charts, texts, etc. to convey messages to their children. They can also help them to **establish daily routine** by using time table or layout plans.
- **Steps:** Using texts or pictures to lay out the sequence of steps to follow through to achieve a specific goal, so that children can learn to finish the tasks step by step independently.
- **Mnemonics:** Make up important reminders with positive short mnemonic phrases, repeat these phrases regularly as reminders.



- **Advanced notification:** Notify children of any upcoming changes in advance, rehearse the new procedures or teach them new skills when needed.

How to handle children's atypical sensory responses or self-stimulatory behaviour?

- **Systematic desensitisation:** Parents can adopt a stepwise approach to help their children adapt to the sensory stimuli gradually so that they can become less sensitive and more tolerant to the stimuli. For example, if a child is very sensitive to noises, parents can play radio programmes or music at home, or specific background sounds (such as sounds in streets, on transportation vehicles, in Chinese restaurants etc.) which are available in the Internet. Parents can start playing the sounds in low volume and gradually increase when children have better tolerance.
- **Replacement:** Some children show sensory seeking behaviour in order to obtain sensory stimulation. Parents can try to replace the problematic behaviour with other acceptable behaviour and reinforce them by rewards. For example, if a child seek out to touch specific texture or even touch other people inappropriately, parents can prepare a keychain or a bracelet made of that texture or similar texture to satisfy their need of sensory seeking.
- **Set ground rules:** If the sensory seeking behaviour is neither harmful nor destructive, parents can set ground rules with their children, such as setting specific time, place and duration for such behaviour. For example, if a child likes to run to and fro at home, parents can set specific timeslots (e.g. before meals, after home training etc.) for him/her to run for 5 minutes with the use of timer and visual strategies such as pictures and flowcharts for the child to understand when he/ she can do that.
- **Develop play skills and communication skills:** When their play skills and communication skills improve, children will be able to engage in more meaningful activities and less in meaningless self-stimulatory behaviour.



Emotion

Some children with ASD have emotional problems. They are agitated or annoyed by small changes in their routines, overreact to stimuli from common objects or sounds or get over-excited or anxious about certain topics. If the emotions are not expressed properly, regulated and controlled, undesirable and destructive behaviours can be provoked easily and further worsens the disputes and conflicts with others.

How to help children with ASD when they are emotionally distressed?

- **Acknowledge their emotions:** Parents can try to understand and listen attentively to their children's experience and feeling, acknowledge their emotion with empathy so that they will feel being understood and accepted.
- **Help them express emotions effectively:** Parents can prepare emotion cards or pictures in advance to help their children express emotions and needs, as well as to rate different emotions (e.g. Anger scale from 1 to 10). This enables them to be more sensitive, expressive and understanding about their own feelings and the others'.
- **Teach them relaxation techniques:** Parents can teach and encourage their children to calm down by different relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, counting down or muscle relaxation exercise. In the long run, these techniques help children regulate and channel their emotions positively.
- **Teach them problem-solving skills:** After children calm down, parents can teach them problem-solving skills to tackle those recurrent difficulties or problems, so as to remove the sources of their emotional distress in the long run.



- **Set appropriate limits on emotion expression:** Parents can teach their children on proper emotion ventilation and set appropriate limit with them in advance (e.g. no hitting, no self-harm behaviours and no throwing objects during temper tantrum). More importantly, parents can negotiate with their children acceptable ways to channel their negative emotions (e.g. to tear or scribble on a piece of spare paper, to punch on pillow, or to hide in room for a while).
- **Establish clear and predictable routines:** Parents and teachers can help to establish a stable living environment and a predictable daily routine in order to help their children maintain stable emotion.
- **Let them know the changes in advance:** For children who have difficulty adapting to changes, parents can try to give them notices in advance and explain briefly about the changes and expectations on them.
- **Observe any abnormal sensory responses:** Parents should be mindful of the environment in order to reduce the impact of sensory stimuli on their children. Children have difficulties to focus and become irritable in noisy environment. Parents can change the venue or provide headset to their children to block the noise if necessary.



Language

When children with ASD start primary school, they may have mastered basic language skills. However, confusion between formal and informal language, comprehension and expression of complex sentences, and the ability to read between the lines are all new challenges.

Some limitations of the children may include:

- Slow processing of verbal messages – they need more time to think
- Inadequate flexibility in processing changeable and indirect information
- Weak imagination
- Weak non-verbal communication skills, e.g. eye contact, intonation and volume control, etc.
- Narrow interests – they usually have very restricted and specific interests and talk about such interests only

These children need explicit teaching and guidance to help them to identify their own problem and overcome them gradually.

How to enhance children's comprehension and expression?

Vocabulary

- If children like reading, they may use formal language in casual conversation. Parents can remind them to use oral language in conversation and on the other hand to use formal language in writing. Parents can teach them the difference explicitly. For example, “kid” is an informal word for “child”.



- Parents can teach children that slangs are informal language used by a particular group of people in informal situations such as casual chatting. It is not necessary for them to study these words but they need to have some basic idea about slangs.
- Parents can remind children the relationship among words. For example,
 - ✧ Things of the same category, e.g. “bed”, “sofa” and “table” are “furniture”
 - ✧ Words of similar meaning, e.g. “happy” and “delighted”
 - ✧ Words of opposite meaning, e.g. “happy” and “sad”

Comprehension

- Encourage children to see things from others’ perspectives. Help them learn the fact that everyone has their own preference, beliefs, thoughts and ways of response, thus further enhance their understanding of meaning behind the others’ words.
- Help children understand different communicative intentions, like lies, white lies, jokes, persuasion, figure of speech and irony. This will allow them to learn the implied meaning or intended message of speech. Daily encounters, cartoons, fables and story books are useful teaching materials.
 - ✧ Jokes: a display of humour when words are used in specific structure to make people laugh
 - ✧ Metaphor: a figure of speech that directly refers to one thing by mentioning another
 - ✧ Irony: state the contrary of what is meant



Expression

- Guide children describe objects and people in a more sophisticated way. Guessing games or riddles are good for improving description. When children describe something in the guessing game, they have to give clues about its colour, size, shape, functions and special characteristics.
- Guide children describe a past event using Wh- questions, that is, When, Where, Why and How did it happen? Who was involved? Then conclude it with personal feelings. Activity photos are good visual cues to help children to recall the incident.
- Encourage children to make their own story book. If there is a recent enjoyable event, parents can help them to make a story book by using the photos or simple drawings. This story book will help them to report their own experience in sequence. For example, a visit to the farm may include:
 - ✧ Taking a train
 - ✧ Feeding the cows
 - ✧ Picking tomatoes
 - ✧ Having a picnic
- Encourage children to express their feelings with emotion words such as happy, sad, scared, angry, disappointed, annoyed, embarrassed, worried, excited and relaxed, etc. Help them talk about the reasons behind and find out the solution together if they have difficulties.
E.g. "I am nervous because I am going to see the dentist tomorrow."



Non-verbal communication

- Eye contact
 - ✧ Let children know that having eye contact in conversation is an important social manner.
 - ✧ Game: Lock eyes counting
Parent and child lock their eyes and start counting. Stop counting if anyone looks away. Record the number counted. To get a higher score, the child needs to sustain their eye contact. This helps children get accustomed to looking at others' eyes for a longer time. Children who like numbers will find this game interesting.
- Control of pitch, volume and rate of speech
 - ✧ Some children have difficulty controlling their pitch, volume and rate of speech. Help children make audio-recording of their speech productions and play the recordings back to them. Let them know what is appropriate in different situations.
 - ✧ Ask children to speak with high-pitched, natural-pitched and low-pitched voice. Guide them to select the appropriate one in general conversation or when pretending to be a mouse.
 - ✧ Ask children to speak with very loud, medium and low volume. Guide them to select an appropriate one for use in library, in general conversation or when pretending to be the Thunder God.
 - ✧ Ask children to speak at a fast, a medium and a slow rate. Guide them to select an appropriate one for general conversation, pretending to be a tortoise or a sloth.



- Cultivate imagination

Game: Get pictures from books, newspapers or magazines and guide children make guesses: What can be inside a Santa's bag? Where is the Bear family going to? Parents can give examples and encourage their children to imagine. For example,

Parent: I think there is a toy train inside a Santa's bag. What do you think, Johnny?

Johnny: A robot.

- General techniques:

- ✧ Explain the purposes of the exercises to the child.
- ✧ Use explicit teaching, try visual strategies like pictures and texts, and give clear instructions.
- ✧ Practise at home before applying techniques with unfamiliar people.
- ✧ Make teaching and learning fun.
- ✧ Children with ASD are just children. For both the children and parents, there is more in life than just therapy. Play is an essential part of learning and there are tremendous benefits from spending unpressured time with the children and let them enjoy with their parents.



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