

# Learning to become a Behaviour Detective

An educational handbook for families that include children on the autism spectrum.



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# Learning to become a **BEHAVIOUR DETECTIVE**

Inside, you will find tips and tricks for understanding challenging behaviour, possible causes of the behaviour, and some ways to help limit or avoid challenging behaviours. Keep in mind that these are not one size fits all solutions, not all of these strategies will work for all children and you might need to try more than once.



## What Is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a range of disorders

characterized by differences or difficulties in social skills, repetitive behaviours, using and understanding language, and sensory processing.

## What Is

## Challenging Behaviour?

Challenging behaviour is behaviour that threatens or is likely to cause harm. Your child may make threats, hit, bite,

scratch, swear or curse, or throw objects at others.

Challenging behaviour is not always the same. It may be mild or dangerous and could last minutes to hours.

Your child may seem angry with you, and this may hurt your feelings. But remember, this is not their goal.

Most challenging behaviour in children living with autism happens because they cannot communicate their wants and needs.

Remember, your child is NOT being challenging to make you angry or sad.

## Why is my Child's Behaviour Challenging?

ATTENTION

Escape

WANT something

NEED

ESCAPE SENSORY

or

**"Pay attention to me please!"**

Possession

Example: When Sophia's mother is on the phone or feeding her little brother, Sophia pulls the dog's tail.

**"Get me out of here! I'm scared! I don't want to do that!"**

Example: At the doctor's office, Logan runs away from his parents, throws items at the doctor and hides under chairs.

**"I like/don't like how this feels/sounds/looks/tastes/"**

**smells; this object or action makes me feel better/worse."**

Example: When Pablo's mother tries new shoes on him at the store, he kicks her, cries and melts down on the floor.

**"I would like to have/keep**

**this; go there/stay here; do this/keep doing this"**

Example: Whenever it's time for bed and Grace's parents have to take her ipad away, she bangs her head against the wall and cries for hours.

## Behaviour

## Detectives look for clues!

**What is your child trying to tell you? When your child's behaviour becomes challenging, take note of the behaviour and the environment. You will likely see a pattern over time. Knowing what situations and environments trigger your child's challenging behaviours can be helpful for solving the mystery of what they maybe trying to tell you, and how to prevent them in the future.**

### Behaviour Clues

What does the behaviour look like?

Who or what is it directed toward? (Person,

object, pet)

Is the child using words or gestures?

Do they seem sad, angry, or excited?

## Environmental Clues

Who is present? (mom, dad, siblings, other visitors in home, pets, teacher, peers, strangers in community, etc.)

Where does the behaviour happen? (In the car, at

school, in the kitchen, at the grocery store, at the park, etc.)

When does the behaviour happen? (Before bed, when waking up, before mealtime, during mealtime, after school, on rainy days, etc.)

What happens right before the behaviour begins? (Child is told "no" or "wait"; they are playing with a favourite item or doing a favourite activity; the child is asked or told to do something, etc.)

# SENSORY PROCESSING

Since children living with autism often experience their world differently than other children, it is important to understand how different sensations in the world affect them. Once you understand more about how the world affects them, you can make changes to their surroundings to better meet their needs.

## Visual (Sights)

**Over-responsive:** Your child may be distracted by moving objects, turn away from you when you are talking close to them, squint or avoid bright lights, or have trouble finding a specific toy in a group of toys.

**How to help:** Provide sunglasses or a hat for indoor and outdoor use. Use soft lamps rather than bright overhead lighting. Limit the amount of details and moving objects on ceiling, walls, and shelves.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may sit very close to the T.V. or bright lights, or hold toys very close to their eyes when playing. Your child may not notice small details.

**How to help:** Rule out vision problems. Allow your child to play with safe toys with moving parts. Use sound or gentle touch to get your child's attention.



## Auditory (Sounds)

**Over-responsive:** In loud environments your child may cover their ears often, scream, run away or hide. Your child may be distracted by music or sounds.

**How to help:** Try noise canceling headphones. Keep verbal instructions short and simple or use visuals instead. Create social stories that discuss what might happen or noises that might be heard. Create a quiet environment for when your child needs to concentrate.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may seem like they are ignoring you, or like they cannot hear you when others can. Your child may hold loud music to their ears or turn up the volume too loud.

**How to help:** Use headphones so your child can listen to music without disturbing others. Use visuals such as waving to gain attention instead of saying their name.

## Touch

**Over-responsive:** Your child may prefer to only touch certain fabrics, refuse to wear some clothes, or dislike their hands being messy.

**How to help:** Be creative with clothing: cut out tags or try different types of material until you find one your child likes.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may touch everything, or they may pinch or harm themselves. They might enjoy getting messy during play.

**How to help:** Give your child something to hold onto and explore with their hands during other activities (soft, squishy, textured). Provide opportunities for messy play in a structured setting, like playing with a mixture of cornstarch and water. Provide activities to keep hands busy or to provide different sensations on the skin.

Share

# SENSORY PROCESSING

## Continued

### Smell

**Over-responsive:** Your child may smell scents that others do not. Avoid places with strong smells (restaurants, public bathrooms), or teach them to breathe through their mouth instead of their nose.

**How to help:** Avoid strong scents when with your child. Use products with a scent that you know your child likes to give them control over their environment.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may smell everything they touch, or they might not notice their own smelly diaper or odors.

**How to help:** Provide safe, non-toxic items to smell like: food, scented toys, or fresh laundry. Supervise your child when they smell items like bath products, flowers, air fresheners, or perfume.



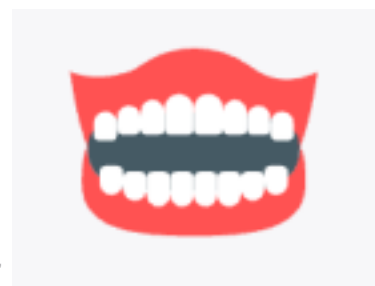
### Oral

**Over-responsive:** Your child may refuse to brush their teeth or might gag when eating certain foods.

**How to help:** Introduce new foods slowly, don't force a certain food if a child is refusing. A child may gag because of the food's temperature, texture, size, or taste. Consider all of these. Try to buy consistent brands. Ask for help from a nutrition counselor to make sure your child is getting all the nutrients they need to grow.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may put everything in their mouth (toys, clothes, fingers), or bite themselves or others.

**How to help:** Try jewelry made for chewing (chewelry) or a loose bandana around your child's neck for them to chew on to prevent them from putting dangerous objects into their mouth.



### Proprioception (Movement)

Proprioception is the sense that gives our bodies information about the position of our limbs in relation to one another and in relation to our environment. It allows us to move our body without having to use other senses like

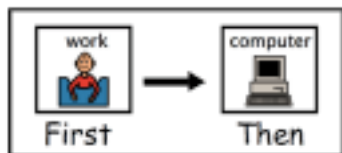


## Warning Before Changing Activities



Children living with autism often find transitioning to a new place or activity hard. They need lots of warning before they can become comfortable in a new situation or environment. Even if it is a familiar environment, it is important to be consistent.

**Visual Timer:** Try using visual timers so that your child knows exactly how much time they have before they need to change activities.



**First/Then:** Try to use first, then language as much as possible. For example, first we do our homework, then we play on the computer. This tells your child what they are expected to be doing now and what to expect next.

# Tips to Prevent Behaviours

## Continued

### Use Positive Language

Instead of telling your child what you don't want them to do, tell them what you do want them to do. For example, instead of saying no hitting say, soft hands. You can also try and redirect your child to an activity that they enjoy.

## Learn How To React

How you react to your child can help to decrease or increase their challenging behaviour. It is important to promote calmness in your child. Challenging behaviours often occur after a child is told to do something. By decreasing the amount of demands or requests on your child, challenging behaviours will be less likely to occur.

## Other helpful things you can do when your child's behaviour is challenging

Try to stay calm. Avoid tense muscles, keep your breath slow and regular.

Try to give your child personal space and keep your hands off them as much as possible, unless it is to prevent injury.

Try to avoid intense eye-contact.

Be aware of your tone of voice. Speak in a slow, calm, soft voice.

Try to distract or redirect them.

Talk about things they like or things they find calming.

# Taking Care of Yourself

For you to understand your child's behaviour, you have to understand your own! Just like your child's behaviour is affected by the world around them, your behaviour is too. Everyone experiences stress, but parents of children living with autism are at greater risk for experiencing stress than other parents.

It is important to take care of yourself and not compare yourself to other parents. Focus on learning to notice when you are becoming stressed and using calming strategies to give yourself a break.

**Deep breathing for 1-5 minutes  
(breathe in through the nose, out  
through the mouth).**

# Calming

**Go for a walk.**



love in your day (even if its  
only for 5-10 minutes).

## PRESENT

## FUTURE

Focus on the here and now  
(don't think any further than  
the next 5 minutes).

Take time to do something you

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