

A practical approach to early support for  
young children with autism at home



# Autism at home

A guide for parents, carers and professionals





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

When we talk about Autism, we refer to it as a spectrum. What this means is that each child will be different, that is “no one size fits all”. Some children will have very mild symptoms and some moderate or more severe.

Nottinghamshire County Multi Agency Pathway to support children and young people with concerning behaviours ([www.nottinghamshire.gov/concerningbehaviourspathway](http://www.nottinghamshire.gov/concerningbehaviourspathway)) focuses on supporting professionals and families to plan the right support, at the right time and at the right place - with an emphasis on early support strategies rather than diagnosis.

This booklet provides some ideas and strategies for you to consider. Please note, that the term ‘secure’ is referred to throughout the booklet e.g. secure touch. By secure we stress that it is important not to cause discomfort, pain or injury..

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 detail, and then try to get 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 support 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 them.

To help you understand and put support in place, it may help to carry out a simple functional analysis. This means thinking about how a child is behaving and asking some key questions;

### **When did this start?**

- Was there anything that triggered it?
- Is it associated with anything? (time, meal, activity, environment, other)
- Is there anything that makes it better or worse?
- Is there something sensory going on?
- Can I “unpick” what is causing this behaviour?
- What can I do to address this issue?
- Has this happened before? Consider keeping a record or diary to see if a pattern emerges?

### **Don't be afraid to go back to basics and consider facts like;**

- Is it too hot or too cold?
- Is the child hungry or thirsty?
- Is it too noisy?
- Is the child in pain? (e.g. toothache/headache/temperature)



## Children who are on the Autistic Spectrum (with or without diagnosis) may:

- Have a need for consistency of approach and for environment and routines to remain unchanged.
- Need flexibility to be specifically introduced; gradually and with planning.
- Need visual supportive environment encouraged at a limit the child/ young person is comfortable with.
- Have difficulty knowing how to spend time if it's unstructured.
- Need to have time alone, especially after busy periods such as school.
- 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 or low 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 being in a car - 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.



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 and any other environment in which the child spends a substantial period of time.

Always use, simple clear communication. Face the child when communicating. Don't expect eye contact. Use familiar language each time and ask other people for ideas and suggestions about communicating effectively by using their name, and give one instruction at a 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.





## Activities of Daily Living

### Dressing

#### **Sensory/suggestions**

- 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.
- Try writing down or noting the order/sequence of dressing to share with others.

#### **Sensory/suggestions**

- 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 dressing 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.
- Be aware of pressure when shampooing or drying with a towel.





- Before bath time, do activities that provide consistent, secure, 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 as smoothly as possible, or in a planned and ordered sequence - Be prepared to be flexible
- If the child dislikes having their face or body washed, encourage them to wash themselves.  
Self-initiated touch produces a less defensive reaction.
- Use a large sponge or loofah. Consider using a consistent secure rubbing action to decrease defensiveness, but always allow the child or young person to determine the pressure they are comfortable with.
- 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 securely wrap the child in it. Avoid exposure of the wet skin to the air: the light touch may trigger a defensive reaction.
- Provide secure-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

- Work closely with your child/ young person and be confident about the level of pressure they prefer and are most comfortable with.
- Seat the child securely on your knee and squeeze the child firmly between your knees or apply a little less pressure to ensure comfort.
- You may place your hands on top of your child's head and exert gently but constant, secure, gentle pressure down, or you may need to apply as little pressure as is possible to ensure comfort.
- 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 down to 10, then we will stop cutting your hair, provide light, secure or no 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.
- 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, it may help to provide secure 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 resolve 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, but be sensitive to a child's fears.





## Oral Challenges

Eating non-foodstuffs, biting hands, chewing and/or regurgitating and similar behaviours are often encountered. There may be a sensory element contributing to the development of these behaviours in this case the following strategies may be helpful: (See also touch challenges, social and emotional environment)

- Redirect the need to bite to more positive sensory activity i.e. chewy toys, crunchy foodstuffs.
- Be aware of choking hazards
- 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. shuddering snake.

## Sleeping

### **Sensory:**

- Develop a calming routine before bedtime. Encourage quiet activities.
- Use a heavy/weighted blanket or flannel sheets to provide secure-pressure and a calming environment, but always make sure whatever method you use is comfortable to the child and is safe.
- Use older fashioned layers of blankets rather than duvets.
- Try using a sleeping bag making sure the child is comfortable and safe.
- Check visually all bed spreads, walls/paintwork for too much detail or colour.
- Check all bed linen for texture and smell i.e. conditioners, washing powder etc. that may irritate.



## Hand Function

Many young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder have difficulties with hand function. The following may be useful to carry out at home:

### Fine hand-play activities

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

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

#### **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



## Adapting Environments

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.

### Inside

#### **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 may find low, ambient lighting and enclosed spaces calming. Ensure these spaces are safe and easily accessible and that the child can be observed.
- Try to minimise 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, although give thought to their room being close to yours to prevent anxiety.
- Perhaps try to give your child appropriate simple, physical 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 bath time.
- Consider clearly marking a work area at nursery/school.

## Outside

Playground equipment can be used at home, school, in the local park or a 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.
- Play houses.



## Noisy Public Environments

- 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?
- 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 ear defences.
- 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

- Consider trying providing secure pressure on the bottom of the feet, before commencing. Again consider seating your child firmly on your lap facing a wall and possibly placing the child's feet flat against the wall and placing pressure directly through the knees into the feet. Have your 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 Activity

The garden may provide a 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 Autistic Spectrum Disorder. It can be planned to meet individual needs unique to the child and their family.





### **Some of the following may be helpful to consider with close supervision:**

- Creating sensory areas - small safe hidden areas or use of play houses with suitable toys can create a calming experience.
- Always make sure spaces are secure, safe and that the child can be observed.
- 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.
- Also consider that a child may find these activities difficult.

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.
- Provide security of routine and planned changes

**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 their 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 the daily timetable at the 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.
- Using an hour glass or other form of time keeper to help structure time. An hour glass is visual and available in different sizes/times e.g. 10 mins, 15 mins, 30 mins.

## 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 Autistic Spectrum Disorder 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 Autistic Spectrum Disorder 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.
- Need play to be in manageable time frames, which can be amended to the child's needs.



Play for most children regularly includes toys. Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder often have difficulty playing appropriately with toys.

**Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder 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 (consider putting some away when not in use and bringing out in a structured way).
- 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.



## 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 do as "toys" e.g. ribbon. |
| Only notices part of toy                         | Consider borrowing or if possible buying a 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 a 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 a 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.                                                                                                                                                                                                          |



## Creating a Social family Environment

### **The Social and Emotional Environment**

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

- Keeping a diary of any challenging incidents can help identify trigger times or situations directing alternative ways of doing something.
- Co-ordinating activities 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 to give 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.
- 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 Autistic Spectrum Disorder 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.
- 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 Autistic Spectrum Disorder 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.
- Transitions between activities often does not seem relevant to the home environment. However, if transition or story cards, objects or

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counters are used elsewhere, this may be helpful also to reduce stress moving on to different times of the day within the home.

Creating a visual timetable to support transitions may be helpful.

- 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                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Child withdraws or punches others who touch him lightly. Child reacts negatively and emotionally when touched lightly (exhibits anxiety, hostility or aggression).</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach others to touch the child securely. 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 securely and directly.</li> </ul> |
| <p>Child reacts negatively when touched from behind or when touched by others.</p>                                                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell the child when you are going to touch him/her. Always touch securely. Assure the child that you will touch gently but securely and that you will not move your hands unpredictably</li> </ul>                                                                                           |
| <p>Infant may prefer the father's firm touch over the mother's firm touch.</p>                                                                                            | <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 securely."). Respect the child's need for control.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                          |
| <p>Child may pull away when approached for a friendly pat or caress from a relative or friend.</p>                                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make kisses on the cheek a form of secure-touch input. Hold the child firmly and give a firm kiss.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <p>Child may reject touch altogether from anyone but his mother or primary caregiver.</p>                                                                                 | <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>                                                                                                                                 |
| <p>Self-stimulatory behaviours are often oral e.g. hand biting, spitting and prompted by anxiety. This can deter other people from building relationships.</p>            | <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.

Individuals with autistic spectrum disorder may experience 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.



## **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 Autistic Spectrum Disorder 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 plan of how families are going to handle the problem may need to be developed. Calm and consistent responses by families are hard but essential. They may need to focus on how they are going to keep people safe.
- Recovery - Time it takes and best method of achieving this needs to be 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.

Exploring issues may trigger a new incident, so it should be carried out when all can manage this, when anxiety levels are low. Use visual clues, social stories of what happened and replace them with a social story of how it could be better with a different approach.



## Home Safety – Family Responsibility

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

### **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..



## **Safety from Access to Rooms and Cupboards**

Care needs to be taken when considering fire and safety. Appropriate locks to rooms and cupboards should be used (not bedrooms), as young people are unaware of the danger of items inside and so there must be a constant awareness that when distressed a child/ young person may exhibit challenging behaviour, which can result in damage to property and so themselves and others. Consider 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 and safety.

## **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.





## Notes

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## Notes

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This booklet has been produced  
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For more information and pdf copies please visit:  
**[www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/concerningbehaviourspathway](http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/concerningbehaviourspathway)**

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