

What are the behaviour difficulties associated with ASD?

There are a range of reasons why children with an ASD have difficulties with behaviour:

- Because of difficulties with communication and social interaction pupils can find it hard to communicate their needs, to understand what other people are saying to them, or asking them to do. This can cause frustration and anxiety to build up and result in challenging behaviour.
- Learned behaviour: we all learn from experiences and we use this information to determine how to behave in the future. If we find that behaving in a particular way brings about a good outcome for us (by either reducing or stopping an undesirable experience or increasing a desirable one) then we are more likely to behave that way again in the future. The individual may enjoy the sense of control created by behaving in a way which brings a predictable reaction from others (Clements and Zarkowska, 2000).
- An attempt to gain sensory input: many people with an ASD experience sensory difficulties, so it can be helpful to consider the possible sensory functions of particular behaviours, eg: biting stimulates the proprioceptive system which regulates what different parts of the body are doing at different times.
- The demands of social situations are stressful because children have to work hard to communicate with other people (Whitaker, 2001). Not all children with an ASD will understand that other people hold different views from theirs. This may also make social situations difficult.
- Transition times, unstructured times, sensory processing difficulties, poor sleeping patterns and changes to routine can all contribute to challenging behaviours.

Does the behaviour have a purpose?

Two questions to ask when looking at a particular aspect of behaviour:

- What is the child trying to tell us by his or her behaviour?
- What is the function of this behaviour? (May, 2005)

What function does the behaviour have?

Philip Whitaker suggests thinking of behaviour as an iceberg: the behaviour you are actually seeing is the tip of the iceberg but there's a lot more going on under the surface (Whitaker, 2001). People with an ASD can't always express their feelings through facial expressions, body language or speech. Instead, they may be expressed through other behaviours.

What causes the behaviour?

To find out what triggers a particular behaviour, over time we monitor to see what the possible causes are, for example if it always happens at the end of the day or transition times. An '[ABC chart](#)' is used to help analyse behaviour:

the **A**ntecedent (what happened beforehand, who was there, where did it happen),
the **B**ehaviour itself,
and the **C**onsequence (what happened following the behaviour).

After identifying potential triggers for the behaviour, strategies are identified to address either the cause or the function of the behaviour. For some pupils they may have an Individual Behaviour Plan (IBP) for a period of time detailing strategies and assessment by tracking and measuring effectiveness of these through a reduction of particular behaviour. We always work in partnership with parents to address challenging behaviours.

When trying to tackle behavioural difficulties, we prioritise and select two behaviours to focus on at a time. Using too many new strategies at once may result in none of them working.

Sometimes things get worse before they get better; a child might at first resist change. It's important to continue with the strategies you are using and be **consistent**. **Punishment rarely works** as many children with an ASD don't understand the connection between their behaviour and a punishment they have received (Whitaker, 2001). Also, punishment won't explain what you do want from the child or help to teach them any new skills.

Strategies we offer in our provision at COPASS

Unstructured time such as break times and transition times are difficult times of the day for pupils with ASD. At COPASS we have access to the library and music room for pupils who find it too challenging to play outside. Key Stage 3 pupils have access to a common room. We have structured playground small games and activities such as reading and LEGO zones set up in the playground to encourage pupils to socially interact with their peers in a motivating activity at break times. We have a variety of lunch time clubs every day such as 'Lets Dance, ICT club, music club, chess club, etc. to structure lunch times and enable social interaction with others.

Class teams will debrief daily to assess and review individual pupil's challenging behaviours. Each week we have a whole school briefing to focus on individual behaviours. We have an assessment week to look at triggers for specific behaviour and reasons for this that we need to address with the whole school, for example walking in the corridors. Pupil's opinions are sought and the school council may be involved.

Visual timetables - Children with an ASD can find [sequencing](#) and organising difficult – visual timetables give clear expectations of events in the day, when an activity has finished and what will happen next. It allows individuals to see progress throughout their day and when a favourite activity is scheduled.

Sensory diet and regulation - Exercise can help to relieve stress and frustration and address emotional regulation throughout the day to prevent a 'melt down'. Many children will have a sensory diet or access the soft play and sensory rooms to aid their self-regulation. Some pupils choose to use the calm room for a limited time, after the behaviour 'storm' has passed they return to task.

Use of visual supports - it is easier to process visual information using [picture symbols or photos](#) to communicate

Social story- short descriptions of situations, events or activities, often with pictures, which include information about what to expect in that situation and why are written and read with the child. They can give some idea of how other people might behave, and therefore be a framework for appropriate behaviour.

Identify emotions- many people with an ASD find it difficult not only to understand how other people are feeling, but also how they feel themselves. Emotions are abstract concepts and we need a degree of imagination to understand them: we can't simply 'see' anger, for example. Stress scales are a good way of helping children with an ASD to identify how they're feeling. A traffic light system, visual thermometer, or a scale of 1-5 to present emotions as colours or numbers. For example, a green traffic light or a number 1 can mean 'I am calm'; a red traffic light or a number 5, 'I am angry'.

Some children do not understand what 'angry' means. One way to do this is to refer to physical changes in the body. For example, 'When I'm angry, my tummy hurts/my face gets red/I want to cry'. When your child has begun to understand the extremes of angry and calm, you can start helping him or her to understand the emotions in between.

Time to relax - It can be very difficult for children with an ASD to relax. Some have a particular interest or activity they like to do because it helps them to relax. Time doing their favourite activity is built into daily routine.

Calming environment - Children with an ASD can have difficulties processing [sensory information](#). Out school is a reduced stimulus setting.

Rewards - stars earned throughout the day are exchanged for minutes with their favourite activity at the end of a session or end of the day. In Friday assembly, achievements are celebrated and rewards given.

Praise – immediately after a child has demonstrated a skill to encourage an association between the skill and the reward and start to use the skill more often.

We work collaboratively with other professionals and agencies to address behaviours.