



CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS

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Challenging Behaviours in Autism: Understanding, Impact, and Strategies

Introduction

Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, sensory processing, and social interactions. Children and adults with autism may exhibit behaviours that are often misunderstood as deliberate misbehaviour when these behaviours are frequent expressions of unmet needs, sensory overload, or difficulties in emotional regulation. Challenging behaviours are also commonly observed when an individual's communication needs are unmet, making exploring alternative ways of supporting expression essential. Understanding and addressing challenging behaviours such as tantrums, meltdowns, destructive actions, self-injurious behaviours, pica, and smearing is essential for fostering the well-being of autistic individuals and supporting their families. By identifying the underlying causes and implementing compassionate strategies, caregivers can provide effective support while ensuring the individual feels understood and safe.

Tantrums vs. Meltdowns

Tantrums: Goal-Oriented Outbursts

Tantrums are often a way for children to express frustration when they do not get what they want. They are common in all children, but in autistic individuals, they may also be linked to difficulties in communication and emotional regulation. A tantrum is purposeful, meaning there is usually an end goal, whether it is getting attention, avoiding a situation, or obtaining something they want.

During a tantrum, a child may cry, shout, kick, or throw objects, but they remain somewhat aware of their surroundings. They may stop if they are distracted or if they achieve their desired outcome.

How to Manage Tantrums:

- Set clear and consistent boundaries. If a child learns that a tantrum leads to them getting what they want, they may continue to use this behaviour.
- Encourage communication by using simple language, visual aids, or sign language if verbal communication is difficult.
- Stay calm and avoid reinforcing the behaviour. Instead of reacting emotionally, model the behaviour you want to see.

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- Praise positive behaviours so the child learns alternative ways to express themselves.

Meltdowns: A Loss of Control

Unlike tantrums, meltdowns are not about achieving a goal. They happen when an autistic person is overwhelmed by sensory input, emotions, or stress. A meltdown is a neurological response to overload and cannot be controlled by the person experiencing it.

A child in meltdown may scream, cry, cover their ears, hit themselves, or become unresponsive. They are not seeking attention or trying to manipulate the situation; they are in distress and unable to cope.

How to Help During a Meltdown:

- **Ensure Safety:** The child's safety must be the first priority. Remove any objects that may cause injury and, if possible, ask others to leave the room to minimise additional sensory input.
- **Reduce Sensory Input:** Dim the lights, lower noise levels, turn off screens, and offer noise-cancelling headphones or other sensory aids.
- **Minimise Verbal Input:** Speak in a low, calm voice if reassurance is needed but avoid overwhelming the child with excessive talking or physical contact.
- **Be Mindful of Positioning:** Avoid standing directly in front of them, as this may feel threatening. Approaching from the side may be less intrusive.
- **Avoid Reasoning During the Meltdown:** At this stage, the child is likely unable to process what is being said. Attempts to reason with them can add to their distress.
- **Allow Recovery Time:** Some meltdowns need to run their course. Give them time to recover and reassure them afterward without making them feel ashamed or punished for their response.
- **Consider Distraction if Appropriate:** If you know the child well and are familiar with what helps them refocus, a calming activity or item may help lessen the severity of the meltdown.
- **Identify Patterns and Triggers:** After the meltdown, take note of potential triggers. Identifying patterns can help you adjust the environment or introduce supportive tools to reduce the likelihood of future meltdowns.

Destructive Behaviour

Some autistic children may engage in destructive behaviours, such as breaking objects, throwing items,

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or hitting walls. This can happen when they are frustrated, anxious, or trying to gain sensory input.

Why Does This Happen?

- Frustration due to communication difficulties.
- Sensory seeking, where some children enjoy the feeling of smashing or ripping objects.
- Overwhelming emotions that they cannot express in other ways.

How to Manage Destructive Behaviour:

- Identify triggers by keeping track of when and where destructive behaviours occur.
- Provide alternative sensory activities, such as squeezing a stress ball or using a safe, breakable object like paper to tear.
- Teach emotional regulation techniques, such as deep breathing, using a calm-down space, or expressing frustration through drawing or writing.
- Offer praise and reinforcement when the child uses alternative strategies instead of destructive behaviour.

Self-Injurious Behaviour

Self-injurious behaviour can be one of the most distressing behaviours for caregivers to witness. This may include head banging, biting, scratching, or hair pulling. It is important to recognise that this behaviour is not the same as self-harm in neurotypical individuals. It is often a response to sensory needs, pain, or an inability to communicate distress.

How to Help:

- Rule out medical issues. Pain, such as ear infections, headaches, or dental pain, can sometimes be the cause of self-injury.
- Provide alternative sensory input, such as weighted blankets, deep pressure activities, or chewing tools.
- Teach alternative coping strategies, like squeezing a soft toy, rubbing textured fabric, or engaging in physical activity.
- Identify 'safe items' that your child can access - replacing the behaviour.
- Seek professional advice if the behaviour persists or worsens.

Being Your Child's Investigator

Understanding your child's behaviour means becoming their investigator. Every behaviour has a reason, even if it

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is not immediately obvious. Rather than viewing behaviours as difficult, consider what your child might be trying to tell you.

Are they overwhelmed? Are they struggling to communicate? Are they in pain? Are they experiencing a sensory trigger that is causing distress?

Keeping a record of when behaviours happen, what was going on at the time, and how your child responded can help identify patterns and triggers. Look out for:

- Changes in routine or environment that might be unsettling.
- Sensory overload, such as bright lights, loud noises, or crowded spaces.
- Physical discomfort, such as illness, hunger, or tiredness.
- Social challenges, including difficulty understanding expectations or interactions with others.
- Communication frustrations, where they may not be able to express what they need or want.

Once you understand why a behaviour is happening, you can put strategies in place to help prevent it or support your child through it. Adjusting the environment, teaching alternative coping strategies, and ensuring they have a reliable way to communicate can make a significant difference.

By taking the time to understand your child's needs, you are showing them that they are safe, valued, and supported. You are their greatest advocate, and by approaching their behaviours with patience and compassion, you can help them navigate the world with greater confidence and ease.