



A Guide to Improving Behaviors in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

*By Laurie Stephens, Ph.D.,
Director of Autism Spectrum Disorders Programs, The Help Group*

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) experience the world in a very different way than other children. For these children, behaviors considered to be inappropriate, such as outbursts, tantrums or “meltdowns” may be their only way to communicate their needs, wants and frustrations. Sadly, these actions may result in children with ASD doing poorly in school and community events, experiencing difficulty maintain friendships and can cause family problems at home. These difficulties often lead to a child being referred for treatment. This article helps parents, family members; educators and health care professionals understand potential causes of behavioral difficulties for children with ASD and provide guidelines to improve behaviors.

Potential Causes for Inappropriate Behaviors

Communication delays: Children with ASD may not always understand what is being said to them or asked of them, due to their communication delays. They may lack the language to adequately express their wants and needs. Acting out, or throwing a tantrum, is a good way to get attention and often is the only way the children can express themselves.

Sensory dysfunctions: Sensory dysfunctions can also be a primary cause of behaviors. A common feature of ASD is oversensitivity to sounds, texture, smell and lights. For the child, it can be as bad as experiencing his or her environment as a jarring alarm going off constantly, a strobe light flashing, a putrid smell everywhere, a feeling of clothing being overly tight and itchy, being asked questions in a foreign language and getting in trouble when the answer is wrong. Very few people would be able to keep their behavior in check under such circumstances, but this is often an everyday reality for children with ASD.

Need for routine: A core feature of ASD is the need for sameness or routine. When children impose a high level of rigidity and structure on their environment, they are setting up unrealistic expectations. When these expectations are not met, it leads to an increase in anxiety and frustration, which, in turn, leads to an increase in behaviors.

Tips to Avoid Behavioral Difficulties in Children with ASD

- 1. Focus on the positive:** The best way to eliminate negative behaviors is to reinforce the positive behaviors children engage in throughout the day. This will increase the likelihood they will repeat those behaviors. For example, praising children for homework they've already completed is more effective than yelling at them to finish it. Use motivating statements like, "Wow, I see you've been working hard on your homework. I'll bet you'll be finished in no time at all." When children finish a task, it is important to give some kind of reinforcement, such as a treat, a token or praise.
- 2. Tell the child what to do instead of what not to do:** It is more effective to give children direct commands. This is particularly true for children with ASD as they often take language literally. When we tell kids what not to do, we assume they know what the appropriate alternative behavior is. For instance, if you tell a child with ASD not to jump in a puddle, he or she may not understand that means go around the puddle; he or she will think it is ok to splash in the puddle, walk through the puddle, etc. Saying, "Walk around the puddle" makes expectations clear and reduces behavioral outbursts.
- 3. Avoid too much language:** Children with ASD often have communication deficits. When frustrated or anxious, they may be even less able to understand spoken language than usual. Rather than trying to reason with a child in the middle of a tantrum, try to use few words and concrete language. Statements such as, "It is time to get in the car" are more easily understood and followed than if you explain why the child needs to get in the car, how you are going to be late and what will happen if he or she doesn't get in the car.
- 4. Warn of upcoming changes or transitions:** While it may not always be possible, it is best to tell a child with ASD about any change that may be occurring and give them plenty of time to adjust. If you are buying new furniture, share pictures or bring your child to the showroom to see and touch it. Ask for help to decide where to place the furniture. This prepares the child for change and reduces anxiety.
- 5. Use visual schedules or reminders:** Structure and consistency are two keys to improving behaviors. A fun way to do this is to develop simple visual reminders or schedules. This can be as simple as putting a picture of your child's teacher on the calendar for every day that he or she needs to go to school, or as complex as having a full schedule written out for every step for getting ready to go to school, along with the expected times of completion.

- 6. Teach calming techniques:** Often, we tell the child to “calm down” when they are feeling anxious or upset. The problem is that we only use the word “calm” when a child is upset! It is important to identify for children what it means to be relaxed or “calm” so that they know the feeling we want them to experience. Try different relaxation techniques — counting to 10, taking deep breaths, yoga, music — to see which ones works best for the child. What calms any child will be highly individualized.
- 7. Beware of sensory overload:** It is always important to look at the environment that the child is in and determine if it is over-stimulating. A child may throw a tantrum in the grocery store because it is too bright or the “beep beep” of the price scanners is bothersome. The tantrum may be the only way the child knows to quickly get parents out of the store. If you think your child has sensory issues, devise coping strategies, such as letting him or her wear sunglasses in the shop, or listen to music to drown out upsetting sounds.
- 8. Use “time-outs” effectively:** The use of techniques, such as “time-outs,” need to be used with careful consideration in a child with ASD. This common punishment removes a child from an enjoyable activity. This may not be effective in children with ASD because what other children consider an enjoyable activity may not be fun for them. For example, a child may be held back from recess because she hasn’t finished her work. However, if the child finds recess too loud, too unstructured and too crowded, he or she will actually prefer staying in over going to recess, and may even stop doing school work in an effort to avoid recess. The teacher in this case has mistakenly reinforced the negative behavior by assuming that the child wanted to go to recess.

These strategies can be used in any environment by parents, family members health care professionals and educators. Consistent and regular use to of these tips can prevent or reduce inappropriate behaviors. It’s important to always keep in mind that children with ASD are not necessarily being manipulative or stubborn when they are having behavioral difficulties. They may not have any other way to express what they are experiencing. If we learn to listen to behaviors, we’ll be able help them handle them in a more effective and productive manner.

This article is reprinted from the Spring 2006 issue of The Help Group’s HelpLetter.