

ideas you can use right away

# Autism

A Practical Guide for Parents

*by Alan Yau*



**AUTISM  
SPARKS**

helping you find the sparks to connect with your child

# Autism

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## **Preface**

Emma was about 12 at the time, completely into her own agenda and not very interested in other people. She knew a handful of words – all the important things in life: swings, bubbles, pizza, pool, water, gum, candy, cookies, and toilet. But other than that, she was essentially non-verbal.

It was 10 months since I'd seen Emma and I was looking forward to working with her at summer camp again. That day I was making a special trip to see her at her Saturday Program on Long Island before going upstate for the staff orientation at camp.

I had made a connection with Emma the previous summer at camp, but was not sure that she would remember me. However, there was no need to worry. Emma came over to me as soon as she saw me, and started humming “You Are My Sunshine” – her way of requesting that I sang it to her. She stayed with me for the rest of the afternoon, and was reluctant to leave even when her mum came to pick her up. Emma's mum was very surprised, and asked jokingly, “What have you done to my daughter?”

Actually that was a great question. What had I done that had created such a powerful connection? In truth, nothing really. But it was something that most other people who worked with Emma had not done.

I had engaged in lots of what I now call Intensive Play with her the previous summer whenever I got the chance (if you had asked me at the time I probably would have called it hanging out). We did lots of her favorite things, which I'm sure you can guess from the list of her words above: blowing bubbles, sitting on swings, playing with water, going for pizza...

That was nearly 20 years ago, right at the beginning of my autism journey. To be honest, at the time I had no training in autism, and had no idea what I was doing. However, that experience with Emma showed me the power of building a connection through play, and I have been committed to using play in my work with children with autism ever since.

As a parent you will have many goals for your child, as a parent of a child with autism those goals may be different than what you previously imagined, but perhaps they seem more urgent. Goals are important, but what is more important is the connection that you build through mindful interaction with your child. Build a bridge to your child's world, cross it frequently as a welcome guest, and show your child that your world is pretty cool too.

In sharing what I've learned, I hope this book acts as a useful guide for you on your journey with your child.

## **Introduction**

Theory is great, but as a busy parent of a young child with autism, what you would really like is a practical guide: with ideas, tips and strategies that you can use right away.

Oh, and you want a book that is concise and easy to understand, right?

That's why I wrote this book. I hope it's what you're looking for.

## **What This Book Is and Why It Will Help You**

Think of this book as a collection of sparks. Real sparks ignite fires. The sparks in this book will ignite ideas in your head about how to teach your child with autism. Every child is different, so I can't give you a recipe that will work for your child, but what I can give you are some of the ingredients for you to create your own individual recipe.

Here's an overview of what you will learn in this book.

- How children with autism are wired differently, and how that affects the way they learn.
- Why Intensive Play is so important to everything else.
- Why it's so hard to get your child's attention, and what you can do about it.
- How visual tools can help your child, and how you can use them easily.
- Why focusing on well-being is so important, and some simple steps you can take to ensure you do.
- What general strategies will help you teach your child.
- Why behavior difficulties happen, and some ways you can help.
- Why today's technology is making it easier for children with autism to communicate, learn, and much more besides.

This book will give you ideas and strategies that you can use immediately with your child. I have illustrated many of the strategies with examples from my own experience – I hope that you see echoes of your own child in some of the examples, and that they provide some light bulb moments for you.

Children with autism are as individual as everyone else – indeed they are probably much more so, as their individuality is less held in check by social constraints. This means an idea that works well with one child with autism may not work nearly as well for your child. However, the ideas I will outline in this book are ones that I have found work well with many children with autism spectrum disorder.

Of course, you are the best judge of whether any one idea will work for your child. If I say something that doesn't ring true for your child, you're probably right - just move onto the next idea. Trust your instincts - you know your child. However, if something does make sense to you, act on it.

## **It's All Do-Able**

I know how busy you are, and I understand how frustrating it is to be told about things that you could do, if only you had the resources, or if you lived in a big city, or if you had a great therapist, etc. ... So, everything I talk about in this book is completely do-able, and generally with very little in the way of resources (with the possible exception of the chapter on technology). What is needed is some time, a little patience, and perhaps a slightly different way of doing things, based on seeing the world how your child might be seeing it.

## **Why Should You Listen To Me Anyway?**

Let me introduce myself briefly so you know why you should spend your valuable time listening to me. About 20 years ago I was fortunate enough to work on a summer camp in the US for children and adults with special needs. Even more fortunate I ended up working in a cabin for young boys with autism, and had the privilege of working with the same group of children every summer for many years. That experience changed the course of my life. It became clear to me that working with children with autism was what I was meant to do.

As a result, I worked as a teacher for over a decade, teaching children with autism for the vast majority of that time. I also had the privilege of being the manager of a specialist autism provision, which allowed me the flexibility to try out different approaches, and to work with great professionals.

Currently I run Autism Sparks - a website dedicated to supporting parents of children with autism.

It is often noted that children are very different in different situations. I am fortunate enough to have been able to work in a number of different situations with children with autism over the past 20 years.

- Summer camp allowed me the freedom to develop my play skills and the privilege of working with the same children every summer for a decade.
- The Resource Center where I worked many years ago allowed me to see children in a home from home setting, when they came for short respite stays.
- As a teacher and the manager of an autism provision, I worked with children daily and practiced many of the strategies I will be sharing with you in this book.
- Now, as the creator of the Autism Sparks website and Facebook Page, I hear every day from parents about the triumphs and difficulties they experience with their children. I also have the privilege of interviewing

autism specialists in various disciplines, and listening in as they answer parents' questions.

All these different experiences have contributed to my understanding of autism and my effectiveness as a teacher in the wider sense of the word. In writing this book I am privileged to be able to share this knowledge with you.

## **Examples**

It's often much easier to relate to a story than theory, so I've included many examples in this book to help illustrate the ideas and strategies. I hope you find the examples useful, and that they make the ideas more relevant to your child. All the examples I give throughout this book are real, but the names have been changed in the interests of privacy for the individuals concerned.

## **Resources Page**

There are so many great resources that I want to share with you, many of which are online. I did consider putting the links straight in the book, but the trouble is sometimes links stop working because websites change. So in the end I decided to put all the links on the [resources page](#), that way I can update them when necessary, which means the best experience for you. Also, by having them in one place, you can use it as a starting point to do your own research when you have finished this book.

## **Important Disclaimer**

While the information in this book is based on good practice and the author's own experience in working with many children with autism, it is not intended as a substitute for advice given by professionals who know your individual child and circumstances.

Nothing in this book constitutes medical advice, and should not be considered as such. The ideas and suggestions in this book should be regarded as general information and not advice. The reader is responsible for ensuring that any ideas and suggestions are safe, and appropriate, for their own child before using them. The author cannot be held responsible for any actions taken, or not taken, by the reader as a result of reading this book.

That said, let's get on with the rest of the book!

## **Chapter 1 - What is Autism?**

I said from the outset that I didn't want to give you lots of theory, but a little bit of theory is unavoidable, and I want to make sure we share a basic understanding before I get on with the rest of the book. If you are already familiar with what autism is, then you may want to just skim quickly over this chapter. I'm going to keep it brief though. You may also know that there are changes coming in the criteria for diagnosis – I'm not going to talk about that here as it won't affect what this book is about.

Autism is a life-long developmental disability that affects a person's ability to communicate and to make sense of our social world. The condition usually appears before the child is three years old. People with autism often also have learning disabilities, but a minority have normal or even high general intelligence. Boys are 4 times more likely to have autism than girls.

As with many things in life, the term autism covers a wide spectrum. In fact the term that is often used instead of autism is "Autism Spectrum Disorder" (ASD), which recognizes that whilst there are things in common amongst people with a diagnosis of autism, that it also covers a wide spectrum. This spectrum includes children who are non-verbal and are very withdrawn, as well as those who are very able but are perhaps perceived as a little odd by others.

## **How Common Is Autism?**

Although the figures vary slightly depending on whom you ask, over recent years the reported prevalence of autism has steadily risen. According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) in the US, about 1 in 88 children are now identified as having an ASD. The figures in other countries average out at about 1 in 100. This makes it one of the most common conditions, yet one that is still largely misunderstood.

## The Triad of Impairments

People with autism have difficulties in three areas, known as “the triad of impairments”:

- **social interaction** – difficulty in relating to others;
- **social communication** – difficulty in understanding, acquiring and using verbal and non-verbal communication;
- **rigidity in thinking** – difficulty in being flexible and generalizing learning.

Autism affects individuals to varying degrees and as we have said this is reflected in the term “Autism Spectrum Disorder”. The difficulties in each area of the triad of impairments may be expressed in different behaviors, e.g. the difficulty in social interaction may be expressed in terms of aloof behavior, where the child will have little to do with others, or as over-familiar behavior, such as touching strangers in the street.

Let’s look at these three areas in turn.

### Social Interaction

For most of us interacting with others is natural, easy and enjoyable. We learn many of the unwritten social rules without anyone having to teach us. We are able to read facial expressions, intonations, body language and make a good guess at other people’s emotional states and motives. In short we are pretty good at reading social information. And because it has been so important for us to do all this as a species, we have developed areas of the brain dedicated to doing much of this for us unconsciously.

However, children with autism find interacting with others much more difficult. Research indicates that the brains of people with autism are hard-wired differently.

*“A raised eye-brow could mean a million things,” said the hero in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (see [resources page](#)).*

Most of us would instantly know what a raised eye-brow might mean in a given situation. However, children with autism don't process social information automatically, they have to try and work it all out – all this conscious processing can be exhausting, and having to “do social” for too long can lead to problems.

Difficulties around social interaction include:

- not understanding the unwritten social rules, e.g. around friendship;
- appearing to be insensitive because they have not recognized how someone is feeling (or don't understand how they should react);
- not understanding other people's intentions;
- not being able to predict other people's feelings and reactions;
- becoming aloof, distant, or uninterested in other people as a result;
- not seeking comfort from other people;
- behaving strangely or inappropriately – because of not understanding what is appropriate in different social situations.

### **Social Communication**

All children with autism will have difficulty with communication by definition. However, the way that difficulty is expressed is very different for each individual, at the most obvious level some children are non-verbal, whereas others are highly verbal.

A non-verbal child obviously has difficulty communicating. However, even a child who has lots of language may not be able to use it to communicate effectively. I recently read a story posted on the Autism Sparks Facebook Page that illustrated this point all too well:

*A mum shared a story about her 11 year old son whose appendix was leaking into his pelvis. Despite being, in mum's words, “eloquently verbal”, he was only able to tell her that his tummy was sore. Luckily, they were at the hospital for an appointment for her daughter and she took him over to the Emergency Room. The doctor said that the appendix must have been painful for at least 6 weeks!*

Difficulties with social communication include:

- difficulties understanding language;
- difficulties producing speech;
- unusual patterns of speech;
- repeating words or phrases;
- referring to self by name;
- not understanding the point of communicating;
- not pointing out things of interest to others;
- not understanding tone of voice, facial expressions, body posture, gesture, body distance, and volume of speech;
- not being able to read the signs that tell you whether to continue talking or to stop;
- the tendency to take language literally, which makes it difficult to understand jokes, sarcasm and figures of speech.

### **Rigidity in Thinking**

This last part of the triad used to be called imagination, but I prefer the term Rigidity in Thinking. It's not so much that children with autism can't imagine, it's that their thinking tends to be more rigid, less flexible; and this rigidity in thinking has far reaching consequences.

Difficulties include:

- having narrow interests and obsessions;
- having to have things a certain way – e.g. all the doors need to be shut;
- having to do things a certain way;
- finding it hard to predict and anticipate;
- poor generalization of learning.

Being able to generalize our learning is something that we take for granted. We can take the skills or information we learn from one context and use it in another. However, children with autism tend to find this much more difficult, and this is something to be aware of when teaching your child a new skill.

We all find change difficult at times, but a child with autism may experience this difficulty at a completely different level, because they can't see the change in context. For most of us, having to take a detour is an inconvenience, but to a child with autism it may induce anxiety, because now he is not sure where he is going, or he feels out of control.

We all have a need for certainty, and when we don't have it, we start to create it as best we can. A child with autism may insist on creating order in the parts of the world that he can control, because he is mystified by much that is outside his control.

Structure and routine can help to support a child with autism, as it provides a safe familiar framework for learning to occur within.

## Sensory

Individuals with autism often also have sensory difficulties, which may include hyper-sensitivity (being over sensitive), and/or hypo-sensitivity (being under sensitive) to any of the 7 senses. That's right, I said 7! We've all been taught about the 5 senses since we were kids, but there are 2 more senses that you may not have heard about and need to be aware of: the vestibular sense (the sense of movement and balance) and proprioception (the sense of body awareness).

If your child is always on the move and likes to spin, it may be their vestibular system is hypo-sensitive – and they are seeking out those sensory inputs. Conversely, if your child dislikes having their feet off the ground and hates spinning and jumping, may be their vestibular system is hyper-sensitive. And if your child bumps or trips over people and things, or looks at their feet when walking downstairs perhaps their sense of body awareness is hypo-sensitive, whereas if they don't like other people being too close they may be hyper-sensitive. Their behavior may be a way of getting their sensory needs met.

Many individuals with autism report sensing the world differently to how most of us experience it. These different sensory experiences can have a major impact on the life of somebody with autism and it is something that we need to be aware of.

Your child's behavior will give you a guide to whether they have sensory difficulties, e.g. if they get distressed around noise, or cover their ears a lot, they are probably hyper-sensitive to sound – and it may actually be painful for them to be in a noisy environment. If, on the other hand, your child is always banging things, it may be that they are hypo-sensitive to noise, and need to bang things to stimulate that sense. Some people with autism even report being alternately hyper- and hypo- sensitive at different times, unable to hear something one minute and the next minute almost being deafened by the same sound.

*“Sometimes when other kids spoke to me I could scarcely hear them, but sometimes they sounded like bullets, I thought I was going to go*

*deaf.” from “A is for Autism” film (see [resources page](#)).*

If you want to know more about sensory issues, check out the links on the [resources page](#), including the 2 videos showing what sensory overload might be like.

## **Uneven Profile**

We are all better at some things than others, it's a part of what makes us all individuals. However, people with autism often have a very uneven profile of skills, with a marked difference in their abilities in some areas compared to others; they often show strengths in those areas that are independent of social understanding, e.g. manipulating numbers or working with computers.

The difficulty is that people often assume that a child who is academically capable, for example, should be equally capable in other areas. This is particularly a problem in school when more able children with autism get in trouble because they just don't understand the subtle social rules, despite their relative intelligence.

While it's great to celebrate and encourage your child's areas of strength, it is also important to address areas of difficulty that may lead to problems in your child's learning now or later in life.

## Strengths

Children with autism are often very focused on their own agenda and can become very skilled in that activity or area. They may even become expert in that area.

*About ten years ago I was a volunteer befriender to a 10 year old boy, John, whose great interest was transport. He chose where we would go on each of our outings, and, not surprisingly, chose to go to the Transport Museum on one of my visits with him. The museum had employed a staff member to act the part of a tram driver, complete with uniform, onboard one of the trams. His job was to tell visitors all about trams. However, John knew far more than he did and proceeded to share his knowledge with him! John also had an encyclopedic knowledge of the London transport system, and it was useful to consult with him about the best routes to take.*

It is often said that children with autism have a narrow agenda. But that does not necessarily have to be a bad thing. We think that it is because we find it hard to find a way to teach them the other things we want them to learn. However, it is useful to think of an analogy here. A laser beam also has a narrow focus, but if we are able to guide that focus it can be very powerful.

A particular characteristic can be a strength or a difficulty depending on our perception and the situation. In Chapter 3 when we look at attention, I will talk about how you can guide that focus more onto your agenda, but for now have a think about your child's strengths. How can you help shape their strengths and interests that will support them to learn other things, or to interact with other people, etc. Could it be used to learn a skill that they would enjoy having, and that perhaps other people would acknowledge them for?

## **Difficulties**

I said that the autistic learning style can be either a strength or a difficulty, but in practice, in everyday situations it can often be a difficulty.

Having a good focus for your own agenda is great when you have time to do your own thing, but it might not be a great trait to have in a mainstream classroom where you are expected to do what the rest of the class is doing.

Not liking change can be a real difficulty for the child and for everyone else. It limits the child's opportunities to experience new things (some of which they may end up really liking), so that they end up doing the same narrow range of activities, or eating the same few foods over and over.

Seeing things in terms of black or white, good or bad, right or wrong can be great in terms of achievement (having high standards, great attention to detail, etc.), but it can have a high price when things don't go as your child expects.

We'll talk about strategies you can use to help your child with some of these difficulties in later chapters. However, start thinking now about the difficulties that could arise for your child from this difference in learning styles.

## Can't vs Won't

I'm sure you've had moments when your child has refused to do something, and you've held your hands up in despair. Why won't they just do it! Well, sometimes it is a case of won't. But just as likely it's a case of can't. What do I mean by that? Well, there could be all sorts of reasons why we can't do something, and it's different for all of us.

To get an idea about what may be stopping your child from doing something, you need to look at the world from his point of view – remember the way he experiences the world may be very different to what you experience.

It may be that there are sensory issues that prevent him from acting. He is using all his mental resources to cope with it, and has no spare capacity to do what you are asking.

It may be that he simply doesn't understand what you want him to do, or that he is anxious about doing it wrong.

It may be that there is something that he HAS to do before he can do your thing, and you are preventing him from doing it.

*A few years ago I took my class out for a walk to the local shops. All was going well for the first few minutes and then one child, Craig, crouched down and refused to get up to walk. I did my best to encourage Craig to stand up and walk but he just would not. I had no idea what was bothering him, and neither did the other staff. In the end we abandoned the trip, and we took the children back to school.*

*I managed to convince Craig to walk with me, albeit very slowly and somewhat bent over. Then a little way later we passed a drain, Craig pulled me over to the drain, and dropped into it a pebble that he had picked up when he had stopped earlier. As soon as he had done that, he stood up straight and walked back to school without a fuss! With the benefit of hindsight, my guess is that he needed to drop that pebble into a drain, but had no way of communicating that. And had I*

*looked at it from his point of view, I may have thought “what is it you need to do” and given him more time to show me.*

It's the wrong way! Perhaps there's a certain order that your child has to have things done in – and he may not have the understanding he needs to communicate that to you.

*Jake was one of my favorite kids at camp. In many ways he was also one of the most challenging children I've ever worked with, he was always on the go and he needed constant supervision. I had worked with him at camp over several summers and had a good relationship with him. This particular morning (about 15 years ago but etched in my mind!) was the morning after he had arrived at camp that summer. I was trying to get him ready to go to breakfast. Trying being the operative word.*

*I gave him his clothes one item at a time, but he would not get dressed. So I tried to help him by physically prompting him - putting the clothes part way on. He kept taking them off. This went on and on, as you can imagine. I didn't have the sense at the time to quit something that was blatantly not working, so I kept trying, and Jake kept resisting. After an hour I was beginning to lose the plot, and Jake was still not dressed, in fact he only had his underpants on.*

*Breakfast was now over and everyone else had come back to the cabin. At this point I asked one of my co-counselors to try, in case that made a difference. It didn't - he was just as unsuccessful. We were at a complete loss, so we asked the admin team to call Jake's mum. It turned out that Jake had recently taken to dressing in a particular order and would not stray from it. Once we knew the order, Jake was dressed in a matter of minutes.*

*With the benefit of hindsight (and a lot more experience), I should have offered different items of clothing for him to choose from, or just got him to pick out his own clothes – which I probably should have done in the first place.*

By seeing whether it's a case of can't rather than won't, you may be able to find a way to help, rather than just throwing your hands skyward and wishing your child would just get on with it.

## **Interventions**

There is currently no cure for autism – and many individuals would argue that they don't need to be cured. However, there are lots of interventions available that can make a difference to your child's quality of life and yours. Early diagnosis and treatment can be particularly effective, so start as soon as you can. Individual children with autism have different needs, and a treatment that works well for one child may work less well for your child. Look carefully at a range of different treatments and select one or more that you think would suit your particular child's needs, and yours – it's important to be realistic about your ability and willingness to implement the intervention.

Programs are numerous, they range from child-centered ones built around the child's interest, to behavioral programs based on rewarding desired behavior. The approach that I take is very much an eclectic one – I am only interested in what makes a difference for each child. However, I have found that certain elements just work better than others. Before you subscribe wholesale into any particular approach, I recommend that you take time to think about whether all of it applies to your child – in the end you know your child better than anyone. Be curiously skeptical when you are researching.

## **Engagement**

So what are the elements that I say work? They are summed up in one word: **engagement**. Have you ever noticed when you are fully engrossed in something, how you could keep doing that thing for a long time and be content? Unfortunately for most of us, social demands interrupt and we usually have to attend to them. However, we are talking here about children with autism, a condition that has a disorder in social functioning at its very core – social demands are not going to so easily interrupt your child!

So you have a choice, do you make use of what already engages your child in your intervention program or do you ignore it and try and impose a program on them? Throughout this book I will argue for the former, but I also acknowledge that there are times when it may not be in your child's interests (or anybody else's) to encourage them to follow certain interests.

## **Summary**

Your child with autism may experience the world very differently from you, their brain is hard-wired differently. The difficulties in the three areas of the triad are real and can make life very challenging for your child – the rest of this book is to spark ideas for you that will make a real difference for your child.

There are many different approaches to working with people with autism, all claiming a measure of success. Many professionals, like myself, use an eclectic mix of approaches based on our judgment of what individual children will respond to.

While many excellent programs exist – none work for every child. Just because something worked for your friend's child, it doesn't mean it will work for yours. Do your own research and think about how well it would fit with your child.

## **Chapter 2 - Intensive Play**

As a parent, you have a pretty good idea about how typical children develop. You've been there yourself; you've watched other children growing up; perhaps you've already raised other children. However, children with autism do not develop typically, and as a parent you are not instinctively equipped to deal with this. Parents often say they found it difficult to reach their child with autism, especially at first, so let us start by looking at how to connect with your child. Let's talk about what I call Intensive Play.

## **What is Intensive Play?**

So, what is Intensive Play – and why don't I just say Play? Well, I have coined this term purely as a short-hand. So we can talk about it. It's nothing special or difficult and you don't need any specific training. The reason I don't just say "Play" is that it doesn't quite capture what I want to talk to you about.

I'm talking about the kind of play where your focus is entirely on your child – giving them your full attention, despite all the other demands on your time. The kind of play where you lose yourself in the interaction, and you share precious moments together.

Now, you might be thinking that this is something that professionals do during therapy sessions, and that you don't have the skills to do it. There are certainly some professionals who use this kind of play exceptionally well, and there are all manner of courses that will teach you some of these skills.

The thing is though, it really isn't difficult. In fact, it's part of our programming! Now, if that surprises you, just think about how you are with a baby or a very young child – you can't help but use Intensive Play – you're there with them, totally present, and engaged.

And we say and do the most ridiculous things don't we? Because we're programmed to be that way!

## Why Don't We Do Intensive Play Then?

So, if we're all programmed to use Intensive Play – you might be thinking, what is the point of this chapter? Why aren't we doing Intensive Play all the time?

Well, we are programmed to do it, but the program is limited in 2 important ways:

Firstly, the program needs input from the **child** to run properly – typically developing babies give lots of feedback to their parents. It's very much a 2 way thing.

But a child with autism often doesn't give the right feedback that our programming demands, and so the program doesn't run properly. Of course, we keep trying, but we start to get dispirited. We start to think, "oh well, maybe he prefers to be alone..." and our attention is caught by other things.

Not because we're bad people, or we don't care – it's just that our programming doesn't know how to keep going. And the thing is, we're not even aware that the problem is our programming.

Secondly, one of the inputs our program uses is a visual one – in other words we look at the size of the child and react accordingly. So, while we almost cannot help using Intensive Play with a baby, as the child gets bigger we no longer get the visual input necessary and, again, the program doesn't run properly.

When we have the right inputs, the Intensive Play program runs smoothly. It's easy to ignore the distractions, and not focus on how tired and busy you are. And trust me, as a parent of 2 young children, I do understand how tiring being a parent can be!

But if we're **not** getting the right input, our program stops running and it's easier for other distractions to get our attention. Or you might decide to work on other goals instead, because it seems easier to see progress with those.

Now, I'm clear that you already engage in Intensive Play with your child. Even if you are the kind of person who doesn't think they play very much, I'm sure you have shared moments of Intensive Play with your child that are just blissful. The reason you don't do more Intensive Play is because of what we've just talked about.

## How To Do More Intensive Play

But, what would it be like to have more of those moments? Would you get a deeper level of connection and relationship with your child? Of course you would.

And there are plenty of other benefits too:

- Intensive Play shows your child that people are worth interacting with;
- you get to experience and share the world from your child's viewpoint;
- it's fun.

And the best part... when your child is interested in coming to you for interaction, then it's much easier to teach them everything else – so all those other targets you have may just prove easier to reach.

So, let's look at how you can do more Intensive Play with your child, and reap the rewards. Now, I know that's not easy in a world of mobile phones, instant messages, email and other constant interruptions! But you know what, you can choose to ignore them – or better yet, switch them off!

I'm sure you agree that it's worth it or you probably would have stopped reading this chapter already. And now that you know that it's your automatic programming that's been stopping you – you can simply decide to over-ride that and **choose** to engage in Intensive Play regardless of whether you get the required input from your child or not. You can mentally flip the switch from automatic to manual as it were.

The thing is, if you are able to keep going with the Intensive Play despite the lack of the **right** input, you will find that your child is actually giving you lots of feedback – in their own unique way.

Knowing that the switch is there, and being able to flip it, is the most important thing for doing more Intensive Play. But here are a few more strategies to help you.

- Use odd moments and make the time to hang out with your child in THEIR WORLD.

Like I said, I know you're busy, so when it's difficult to free up time, make use of odd moments during the day to hang out with your child in their world. The more you do that, the better you'll understand, and the more your child gets used to you joining them.

- Look at the world through your child's eyes, find out what's great about what they are doing and (if appropriate) join in.

Children with autism often have wonderful ways of looking at the world that the rest of us just haven't considered. Try using the same equipment as your child, in the same way.

- Be the most interesting thing in the room.

Toys and other resources can be great. However, if you find that you have to compete with them for your child's attention, try and create some times during the day when you are the most interesting thing in the room.

- Take your child's lead.

Resist the urge to force your own agenda. Take your child's lead and take the time to become a welcome guest in their play, you can then offer suggestions and guide the interaction. However, if you rush it, you may become an unwelcome pest instead.

- Have fun, note the kind of things that work, and do more of them

Be available to repeat things that work. Work out what it is about those things that your child likes, and offer more of those kinds of things. Find more ways to make you and your child laugh – laughter releases positive chemicals and reduces the level of stress chemicals.

## **But My Child is Older**

Perhaps your child is older and it seems less appropriate to be doing what I'm suggesting (your programming certainly thinks so right!). Well, you can still play with an older child. Just make it appropriate to them. The important thing is to get into their world, and take the time to hang out there.

*A few years ago, I spoke with a parent who was upset that her 10 year old son, Ian, was returning home from school, going straight to his room, and not choosing to spend any time with her, except to eat. I suggested that she did some Intensive Play with Ian. She was overjoyed by the change in him when she started playing with him – a few weeks later, we got a note from her saying, “I’ve got my boy back”.*

So, now that you know that Intensive Play is easy and that it's your programming that's been getting in the way, just go and do more of it! Your connection with your child is fundamental to everything else we will talk about in this book, it makes everything else easier.

## **Take Your Time and Enjoy It**

Play for play's sake, play to have fun and to fully appreciate and enjoy the experience of being with your child. Sure you may have a whole ton of goals for your child, but while you are engaged in Intensive Play, those are side issues. The important thing is for your child to enjoy the experience of playing with you, and to build a relationship based on trust and mutual enjoyment.

When your child is enjoying spending time with you, they will come and initiate interactions with you – this is true for the great majority of children with autism as it is for normally developing children. Once they are coming to you, you can then start to scaffold their learning, and you will find teaching other things will be easier, because now you have their attention and trust. Intensive Play has to start at your child's current level of development and be based around something which he or she already enjoys – it is no use starting by trying to do things that your child has no interest in, that can come later when you have established the trust.

Intensive Play creates that trust – I have worked with many children who would do little for anyone else, but who would nevertheless happily do what I asked. I put this down to trust and the fact that I joined the child in their world, rather than always trying to pull them into ours. Take Emma for example (whom you met in the preface):

*The first time I met Emma she was sitting in a sand box and quietly engaged in filtering sand through her fingers. Her counselor was sitting some distance away watching her at play; she had worked with Emma long enough to know that she would be in the sand box for a while yet. When I sat down at the edge of the sandbox, Emma seemed to hardly notice. I picked up some sand and started to filter it through my fingers, Emma still took very little notice of me. After a while I picked up some more sand and gently poured it into Emma's hand just as she was about to pour sand from one hand over the fingers of the other hand. Emma opened her hand to catch the sand I was offering her. A little look up at me from Emma. A tiny spark of connection. We continued this little game for about half an hour, little by little, Emma*

*began to trust me to be her partner in what had previously been her own little game. She began to expect my turn in the game, holding her hand open for my little offerings of sand.*

*Over the course of that summer and subsequent summers, we spent a lot of time together in the sand box, on the swings, blowing bubbles or singing the same few songs over and over again. There was never an agenda, we just enjoyed spending time together. I was not doing anything particularly remarkable, just literally hanging out in her world, but she adored me for it, because nobody else really did that. The more we hung out, the more Emma trusted me and would do what I asked. At first it was always me who approached her, but soon it was Emma who would run over to me when she saw me.*

*When none of her counselors was able to get her to go to any activities at camp, Emma happily went with me to the cooking room for her next scheduled activity. However, I later found out that as soon as I left the room, she got up and left too.*

Emma had some good counselors in her cabin, and they were great with the other children with special needs, but Emma's autism made it difficult for them to reach her. If they had taken the time to just hang out with her, I suspect they would have got her trust too.

Find things that your child is interested in and encourage them in their interests. Join in those activities in ways that are acceptable to your child – have your participation be on their terms, but don't be afraid to gently extend what they find acceptable. A child who is fully engaged in something is less likely to be trying to climb up walls or through windows, especially if you are right there also fully engaged! Be creative, go over the top, go crazy – if nothing else, your child will find you interesting and that's got to be a good thing!

Many children with autism enjoy rough and tumble play, and being chased and caught. Some children enjoy play that involves spinning, or being squashed. You will get a good idea of what your child likes by watching them at play, if they enjoy spinning themselves, find ways of spinning them,

or if you are very brave, spinning with them. If they frequently hide under the cushions of the sofa, they will probably enjoy being squashed under a big cushion.

Some people with autism report that they enjoy the sensation of pressure. However, some children do not enjoy being touched. Others enjoy heavy touch, e.g. being squeezed, but not light touch. Yet others react very negatively to being touched without warning. I am sure that you will already be very aware if any of this applies to your child! You know your child best, just adapt any of the ideas in this book to suit your child.

If there is one thing I want you to get from this book, and at the risk of repeating myself, it is this: join in your child's play, play on their terms, play for its own sake, play for fun! One of the core difficulties in autism is that of social interaction – other children naturally know how to play socially; you will have to actively teach your child how to play with others. The great news is that it is so much fun, and so rewarding.

## **Some More Ideas for Intensive Play**

Spend some time just watching your child and you will soon have lots of ideas for ways to engage in Intensive Play with your child. However, if you want some help to get you started, here are a few ideas.

### **Join In**

Whatever your child is involved in, join in – obviously you should consider safety first, I'm not suggesting for a moment that you jump off window sills if that is what your child likes to do – in fact, you would want to actively discourage it. However, if your child does like to jump off window sills, then make use of this information about your child, take them somewhere that is safe to climb and jump off, that way you can enjoy joining in with them.

Of course you will want to extend your child's play, for example if they are pushing a car backward and forward, you might try and build a road with them that the car can go along. In fact you should, because left to themselves a child with autism often does the same limited range of actions. However, let your child dictate the pace – don't be in too much of a hurry to extend their play that you forget to establish a connection with your child first. Spend some time just pushing a car back and forth with them.

If your child is protective of his or her space, then respect that and don't encroach too much at first – you can try inching slightly closer later. If your child walks away when you try to join in, let them, and join in from a distance that is comfortable for them. And have fun.

### **Double Up**

Watch what your child likes to play with, and if possible get several of each thing, so that if your child picks up a certain item, there is another one available for you to pick up and join in. Watch what your child does with the item and try it for yourself. If nothing else you may get some insight into why your child does what they do. What you may find is that they take an interest in you because you are doing what they are doing.

## **Bubbles**

Many children just love bubbles! They are a great resource, very cheap, portable, readily available and easily replaceable. Have fun! Blow lots of bubbles to get your child's attention. Get excited about the bubbles yourself. When your child is sufficiently interested in them, see if you can draw attention to your face by pausing with the wand to your lips. However, remember that the interaction is more important, so don't pause too long or you risk losing your child's interest.

## **Balloons**

These are just as cheap and available as bubbles. However, some children may be scared by the potential of them popping (some adults are too!). However, if you don't blow them up too much you should be safe. Balloons are also a choking hazard for some children, so if your child likes to put things in their mouth, use balloons with caution.

Blow up a balloon and let it go so that it whizzes round the room making a rude noise as it does so. Get very excited by this. Notice if your child is paying any attention, if they are great, continue. If not, after blowing the balloon up again, go over to your child and either hand them the balloon or let go of it very near them. If this game goes well, encourage your child to watch where the balloon lands and to bring it back to you to blow up – this then builds much more into an interactive game rather than a spectator sport for your child. Give them a balloon to try and blow up (although they may well find this very difficult to do).

Have fun blowing it up, be very exaggerated in your breaths – perhaps let go of it suddenly while you are blowing. Exaggerate being surprised that it has disappeared – if your child has been watching you blow up the balloon, they will now be looking directly at your face as there is no longer a balloon there.

If you would rather not keep putting a balloon back in your mouth, then you can always use a balloon pump. Try rocket balloons – these are fantastic!

They are designed to be blown up and let go, and make a wonderful raspy noise as they shoot all over the place, see the [resources page](#).

### **Trampolines**

Get a mini-trampoline. Many children like to bounce, and would be very happy to be left alone to play on it alone. However, we are thinking about Intensive Play, so you need to have a role too. What we can provide as adults to the whole bouncing process is height – if your child will take your hands while they are bouncing then you can assist them to jump much higher than they might manage on their own. This makes you very interesting for your child! You will naturally be facing each other as you do this, which is great.

Bring the bouncing to a halt every now and then, and see if you can get some eye contact or some verbal signal before you begin again – the pause in the action can be a very natural prompt for your child to look at you and wonder why you have stopped. If every time they look at you, you take it as a cue to start again, your child learns the power of establishing eye contact and is more likely to use it.

Trampolines are also great for sensory reasons or to calm – and there will be times when it's best to let your child bounce without expecting them to interact with you.

### **Mirrors**

Big mirrors are great to play in front of, especially for children who find it difficult to look directly at other people. You can watch each other in the mirror, and copy each other's movements. Start by copying your child's movements, and then if they seem to notice, try doing something odd, perhaps making a sudden movement or pulling a face, and see if your child will copy you. If not just continue to copy them.

Table top mirrors are useful too, but because they are smaller, they are more useful for concentrating on faces – again try pulling exaggerated faces. Blow raspberries, blow kisses – in short, be silly and have a giggle.

### **Front Facing Camera on an iPad**

We will be looking at Technology in Chapter 8, but for now if you have an iPad try using the front facing camera with your child. You can pull silly faces and generally have fun with it. You can also try the photo booth feature on the iPad and experiment with the different effects.

## **Use Your Imagination**

Now that I've got you started, use your imagination to find creative ways to engage in Intensive Play with your child. The opportunities are endless if you look for them. Fantastic resources can be very helpful, but remember the thing that will make the biggest difference in your play with your child is YOU – nothing else can be used as flexibly.

## **Automatic to Manual**

I know you're busy, but freeing up the time to engage in Intensive Play with your child is so important. Think about those moments when you've been able to do that and how great that felt for both you and your child. Now think about what it would be like if you could do more of that. What would be the impact on your level of connection with your child? What would it be like if they wanted to try things with you just because being with you is worth it from their point of view?

Are you sold? Good, now just do it. And remember if your programming stops you, because you're not getting the right response, or if your child is too big – just turn that imaginary switch from automatic to manual. Be warned though, that switch has a nasty habit of sliding back to automatic unless you keep an eye on it.

## **Chapter 3 - Attention**

In this chapter you'll discover how to take advantage of your child's laser focus and turn that attention on to your agenda:

- first I'll explain why it's so hard to get your child's attention;
- then I'll explain why it's really important to get it;
- and I'll finish by telling you how you can get their attention and, increasingly, keep it.

## **Why It's Hard To Get Your Child's Attention**

So why is it so hard to get your child's attention? Children with autism are notorious for doing their own thing, and not paying attention to what adults want them to do. I'm sure you know all too well what I'm talking about. Despite all your efforts to get your child interested in what you want them to learn, their passion is for something that seems far less productive to you, and sometimes completely random. Even your attempts to show them a better way to do something meet with stiff resistance.

In the end it just seems easier to let them do what they want, when they want, and in the way that they want to do it. Anything else just seems an uphill struggle, with not much chance of success.

The thing is though, it can be hard for some children with autism to focus on more than one thing at a time – so they either focus on your agenda, or their own. And they know for a fact that your agenda is not nearly as interesting as their own! So why should they make the effort to do your thing, when that would stop them from doing theirs?

## **Why It's Important To Get That Attention**

I'm sure that as a parent you've experienced times when you've tried really hard to teach your child something and you know in your heart that you don't have their attention, but you plough on anyway. I've certainly experienced that myself as a teacher.

But how effective is that? Unless they are paying attention, they are not going to learn what you are trying to teach. And left to themselves, many children with autism will do the same narrow range of activities over and over again. There may be lots of other things that they would love to do, if only they would try them. And it's important that children have a broad range of experiences, that's how they learn – and that's why we continue our uphill task, hoping that eventually we'll get through.

How would it be though if, instead of pushing uphill and hoping, you could find things that were so compelling for your child that they could not help but give you their attention?

## How To Get Attention and Keep It

Well, it's not as hard as it seems. The trick is to think about what would appeal to your child from their point of view. Diplomacy, as someone once said, is the art of letting others have your way. Getting your child's attention onto your agenda is kind of like that, it's the art of letting your child have your way. Create an agenda that is so interesting, that your child would choose it anyway. That removes half the battle. But it's still **your** agenda.

Following some amazing training from Gina Davies from Attention Autism a few years ago (see [resources page](#)), I took on a whole new way of thinking about how I taught, and began to look at everyday objects with a new question. How can this thing be used to grab the children's attention?

I invite you to look at things this way too. Here are some everyday objects and some things you could try:

- A sieve. Use it to sift flour onto black paper – it's just wonderful to watch, and then you can draw in it, or write in it – or, if you're very brave, even jump and leave footprints in it.
- A balloon. Blow it up, draw a face on it or write on it, and then pop it with a pin (but only if you and your child can stand the noise).
- A sauce bottle. Fill it with paint and squeeze paint from it to draw pictures – it's much more satisfying somehow than using a brush, and looks great.
- Shaving foam. Fill a piping bag with it and watch it squirt out. Decorate a pretend cake, or create a pretend ice-cream.
- Little pots or containers. Use them to make rows of sand castles, or flour castles – and then leap on them!
- etc.

Create a structure that exciting things happen within, so that your child wants to give you their attention, and actually begins to anticipate what is going to happen. This may not happen the first few times you try it, but if you do this consistently, and have an agenda that you know your child will love – it gets them into the habit of giving you their attention, and having

fun with you. And once they are used to giving you their attention, their love of routine, and their laser focus, may well keep it there even when your agenda is slightly less fascinating.

## **Make It Your Agenda**

Some toys are great for getting attention too. Get toys that make silly noises, or do silly or unexpected things. And if your child is very visual (and many children with autism are), get lots of toys that spin, or light up, or both.

But make it **your** agenda, so that your child learns to join you. Instead of giving the toys to your child - and leaving them to it, use them as a reason for your child to give **you** their attention. Only have those toys available for your sessions together. And have enough variety to keep their interest.

Each time use the toys yourself first, and show your child how utterly delighted you are with each one you pick up. Show them how it works, or different things that you can do with it. Use it to teach about sharing attention and enjoyment.

## **What About for Older Children?**

And for older children, try some wacky science experiments – there are lots of websites with great ideas – I've put some on the [resources page](#). Just adapt whatever you find to suit your child.

## **Give It a Go**

So, how would it be if your child knew that your agenda was even more interesting than their own – that would be something wouldn't it? It is possible, if you create these “irresistible invitations to learn” as Gina puts it.

I will warn you though, this is not necessarily an easy thing to do. You actually have to be quite organized, and do a bit of planning to get the resources ready. And of course, you don't have enough time in the day as it is.

But it will be so worth it to see your child give you their complete attention, and once you start looking at things this way, you'll see great resources all around you. Your shopping trips may never be quite the same again!

Give it a go, and create some magical shared moments. You'll find some useful websites on the [resources page](#).

# Chapter 4 - Make it Visual

## **We're All Visual Thinkers**

According to John Medina, in his book *Brain Rules*, vision trumps all other senses. For all of us. We learn best when we can see. However, children with autism tend to be even more visual than the rest of us. And visual tools and strategies can make a big difference to the way they understand the world.

Let's be clear about something: we all use visual tools, e.g. books, calendars, shopping lists, etc. And we go back to them often. We learn from books, and we go back to them when we're not sure if we've understood something. We use calendars to schedule our time, as well as to keep track of things we've done – I don't know about you, but I rely on mine so much that if I try and schedule something without first checking my calendar, I almost invariably double-book myself. We use shopping lists to make sure we remember to buy the things we went to the shops to get – rather than everything else but those items. We take photos and record video clips so that we can be reminded about things.

And your child is likely to be much more of a visual thinker than you are. So, do you ensure that he has the same visual tools that you have, and more?

Spoken words are transitory – they are gone as soon as they are spoken. However, visual tools are concrete, whether it be a real object, a photo, a symbol or a written word. Visuals can be returned to over and over again, helping your child to understand, and sometimes to accept, the information.

## **Visual Tools**

Almost anything can be a visual tool. Holding up your car keys can tell your child they are going out in the car. Showing a photo of your sister could mean that auntie is coming round. Holding up 2 things for your child could be an indication that they should make a choice. Putting your child's photo on something could mean that it is their turn to do that activity. Etc.

Visual tools can help your child to take in information, and they can also be used by your child to make their needs and choices known or to share information with others. What visual tools you choose to use will be partly dependent on your child, but also on what is practical. Physical objects may be easier to understand, but symbol cards and photos may be more portable and are easier to reproduce. Visual systems such as apps on iPads and other tablets may be more portable still.

## Visual Schedules

*Maggie, aged 7, liked having her visual schedule. She would scan down it every morning when she first came into class, to see what was coming up. Maggie was not particularly keen on having to do work, but if work was on her schedule she would generally do it without fuss.*

*One day her parents asked if we could help her put on sunscreen on sunny days, adding that she hated having it on! The first day we managed to get a tiny bit on her nose before she put up a huge fuss. The next day, we put “sunscreen” on her schedule before “playtime”, and showed her the new card at the beginning of the day. When it came time to put it on, she could see that it was the next item on her schedule and allowed us to put the sunscreen on her with hardly any fuss.*

*The following day, we again put “sunscreen” on her schedule before “playtime”. This time Maggie came to me and requested sunscreen to be put on her! We continued to use the “sunscreen” card on her schedule and had no more problems with putting it on her.*

Of course, visual schedules don't work this well for every child, but they often work surprisingly well. Some parents find that visual schedules make it less of a fight to get their children to engage in daily tasks – they find that their child is more willing to do a task just because it is on the schedule. It's almost like an external source of authority.

If you don't already use a visual schedule with your child, it is definitely something to consider. Even if your child is verbal, seems to understand verbal instructions, and seems to understand what is coming up during the day, a visual schedule can provide them with additional support when they need it. Children with autism often have difficulties organizing themselves; a visual schedule may help to keep them on track.

It may be that on their good days, your child may not seem to need it. However, if you use it every day, then on bad days when your child is

finding it difficult to cope with everything else, their familiar visual schedule may be something that they can focus on.

Of course, you will have to spend time teaching your child how the schedule works, and this may seem a lot of work to start with, but it will be well worth the effort.

Remember, engagement is key - find ways to engage your child in whatever it is you want them to learn. In the case of visual schedules you may want to begin by putting only a couple of symbols on their schedule, ending up with a picture of a favorite activity as the last item. For example, drink then TV. When you first teach your child to use a visual schedule, only put on activities that your child will generally accept without fuss – get them used to the idea of the schedule before you put more demanding activities on it. Once your child accepts the idea of the visual schedule, they will be more able to accept less preferred activities when they are placed on it.

And if the thought of getting lots of symbols and things ready is enough for you to jump to the next chapter, let me make it less scary. Visual schedules don't have to be difficult. The important thing is that you create them in a way that is manageable for you and is understandable for your child.

Use your strengths and your child's strengths. If taking and printing photos is easy for you, and your child responds well to photos – use photos. If drawing simple line drawings is easy for you, and your child understands them, then do that. And if your child reads easily then use words (typed or hand-written). Whichever route you take, make sure the visual schedule cards are always available where you need them (hint: make lots of spares!).

Oh, and you don't need to make a card for every conceivable activity before you start – start with a few things that your child engages in frequently, and build them up over time.

Velcro works great, but if you don't have any then use fun-tack (blu-tack). Don't let the lack of something stop you using visuals – find something else that will work for now.

A visual schedule could be as simple as:

Get dressed  
Breakfast  
Brush Teeth  
TV  
School Bus

Have a card for each task, and have the schedule run from top to bottom. As each task on the schedule has been completed, it is removed by your child and put into a “finished” container.

Teach your child that the item at the top of the schedule is what they are currently expected to do. You may have to persist with this, but it can make a big difference for some children. One of the difficulties that children with autism face, is never quite knowing what is going on. Having a schedule that tells your child in a very concrete fashion can be very helpful.

Obviously, you as the parent are in charge of the schedule – it is a tool for you to help your child understand their day, and to help them stay on track. It should not turn into something that your child uses to keep the same rigid routine every day.

Your child may want to insist that the same items are on their schedules in the same order every day – do not allow that to happen! Make sure you change things on the schedule regularly, if it makes sense to do so – otherwise your child may get stuck in a routine that they may be unwilling to stray from. Using the schedule should be the safe, familiar routine – the flexibility is that the tasks in the schedule can and should change.

## Using Printed Symbol Cards

You may already be familiar with printed symbol cards that have line drawings to represent different activities, and that may be the image you have in your head while reading this chapter. If so, and if they work for your child, then great. Use them. However, please don't think that's the only option – as I said earlier, use whatever works.

There are commercial software packages that can be useful in creating symbols or line drawings for visual schedules – perhaps your child's school already uses these packages, ask them for advice. The problem is, these packages tend to be very expensive.

However, did you know that there is a free alternative? It's called Pictoselector and was created by Martijn van der Kooij, who has a son with autism. Martijn created Pictoselector for his own family originally, but has generously made it available to everyone. You will find a link on the [resources page](#).

While it's great to do joined up stuff with your child's school – it really isn't necessary to use the same pictures or symbols at home. If you can, then great. However, what I found as a teacher was that parents often didn't use visuals at home, **because** they thought they needed to be the same as the ones at school. Don't let this be a reason to stop you using visuals – in most cases your child will learn that you use different symbols at home, and it will not be a problem.

## **Make It Easy – Don't Be Precious About Visuals**

It may look lovely for all your symbol cards to be exactly the same size, and if you've got the time, why not. However, the reality is that, as a busy parent, your time is in short supply. We often don't use things we know would help, simply because we don't have time to get them ready. So, make it easy for yourself. See what you can use without having to spend much time getting it ready.

If you want a visual of a particular food item – cut out a piece of the packaging, or the label, and use that. If you want to let your child know they are going to McDonald's, show them the infamous logo that you've cut out from one of their products or from the paper tray liner.

Have lots of spares, so that visuals are always to hand. And time spent laminating some of your visuals may be time well spent (but that doesn't mean you have to laminate everything!).

## **Now, Next**

It would be wonderful if your child simply did everything you asked of them, but in reality we all use some form of bribery in the form of “now, next” or “first, then” with our children. However, if just saying it does not make much difference to your child, try making it visual. Use a now and next board – have a piece of card with the words “now” and “next” on it, and enough room under each word for the visual of that activity. You can download a template from the [resources page](#).

## Calendars

This is one visual aid we all use, so make sure you use it with your child. As soon as your child has some concept of the passing of time, start using calendars. Even if you're not sure whether your child understands, there's no harm in trying. And the benefits are huge. Your child will have a much better idea about things that will be happening in the future, which means that you can prepare them for things well in advance. If your child really likes an activity and asks for it constantly, you can put it on the calendar and let them know when it will happen next – this can be really reassuring.

Get ones that have a square for each day, that you can write in. Or make your own - there's a free monthly calendar that you can download and print on the [resources page](#).

## Velcro

Sticky Velcro is amazing! Use it to stick visuals up so that they can be easily removed. It's also useful for sticking up other things too – as when the thing is removed, it is obvious where it came from:

*Charlie was 5 years old and liked to re-arrange things. He especially liked pulling all the posters off the wall. I tried attaching the posters to the wall with sticky tape. I tried fun-tack (blu-tack). I even tried sticky plastic film that covered the entire poster. Nothing worked until I decided to use sticky Velcro. Charlie still took the posters off, but what was different was that he put them back! And after a few attempts he just left them on the wall. The part of the Velcro that was stuck to the wall seemed to give him a sense that the poster was supposed to go there.*

I have also used it to attach things that frequently get lost in the classroom – e.g. remote controls (I stuck one side of the Velcro to the remote and the other side to where I wanted the remote to live).

## **Post-it Notes**

Post it notes can be really useful as temporary visuals, as they instantly solve the problem of how to stick the visual to the place it will be most useful. This can get a little expensive though, and they only really work if the visual is something you can write or draw, but there may be times when these may be very handy.

## **House Rules**

We all have our own set of house rules, and your child is probably well aware of yours. However, if your child is aware of them, but does not seem to keep them, try writing them up – and having them somewhere prominent. Don't have too many rules. Read them with your child often – and point them out when they've been kept, as well as when they have been broken. It's important to praise your child for doing the right thing. Oh, and be prepared to keep the rules yourself, or your child will probably remind you!

## **Whose Turn Is It Anyway?**

If your child struggles to take turns, try using a little card with their photo and name. When that card is placed at an activity (e.g. computer, TV) then they know it's their turn. This may help if your child likes to try and control everything, e.g. they are using the computer and also insist that no-one changes the channel on the TV, etc. You can also have cards for other family members to indicate when it's their turn.

## **Visuals – Help To Stay On Track**

Another benefit of visuals is that they can help your child stay on track and do the task at hand, rather than getting back to their own agenda, because they've lost track of what they should be doing. Make sure that the visual is where your child can see it while doing the task, that way you can refer them back to it easily.

## **Practice At Doing Things The Right Way**

If your child uses some kind of visual sequence for doing new tasks, they not only see what they should be doing at each step, but each time they do the task they practice getting it right. So often we let children do things the wrong way and then try to correct them. While this may be a good way for some children to learn, it probably isn't the best way for a child with autism, especially for one who likes things to be the same each time. For some children with autism, the way something is done the first time **is** the right way and they can be very resistant to being corrected later.

## **Photo Prompts**

Photos can be great prompts. We've already talked about how they can be used to show your child where they are going, or who is coming to visit. Another way they can be used as prompts is to show your child what they should be doing. Take a photo of your child doing the desired action and then use it as a prompt, e.g. if you're trying to get your child to sit at the table to eat, but he keeps getting up, try giving him a photo prompt, when you sit down to eat, of him sitting appropriately at the table.

And with so many devices that can take and show photos, you may not even need to print them out. However, some children really benefit from having something they can hold in their hand, so if your child is like this then you should print the photos out.

## **Chapter 5 – Well-Being**

In this chapter I'll explain why focusing on your child's well-being is so important, and I've enlisted some help in the form of a bottle of fizzy drink, some raisins and a packet of mentos mints.

We all have good days and bad days - days when the sun seems to shine on us, and days when the whole world seems to be against us. And it doesn't need to be some huge thing to make us feel bad, sometimes the cumulative effects of everyday hassles can be just as stressful as a single big trigger. Have you ever had a day when lots of tiny hassles just "did you in"?

## Well-Being Constantly Under Threat

Children with autism face **many** more hassles than the rest of us, for example:

- they're less able to filter out what doesn't need to be worried about;
- they may be facing sensory difficulties;
- they may have difficulty communicating something that is bothering them;
- they're more likely to misunderstand other people's intentions;
- etc.

When you look at these hassles from your child's point of view, you'll understand why their sense of well-being is constantly under threat.

## **Anxiety**

We all become more anxious when we don't know what is going to happen, or what is expected of us, or when we don't feel in control. It could be some big thing, or something altogether more mundane such as having to deal with bureaucracy that you're not familiar with. So imagine what it might be like for your child with autism who has difficulty with social understanding, and is expected to deal with other people every day.

## **A Bad Day for You**

Let's think about a bad day for you. Perhaps you've had a whole series of things go wrong all day: you had a bad night's sleep, your spouse said something annoying and insensitive over breakfast, the car wouldn't start, you were late for work, the computer kept freezing, and then it finally stopped working completely and you lost the report that you just spent 2 hours creating...

What do you do to make yourself feel better? Do you go for a walk? Perhaps you have a coffee? Or phone your friend to complain? Or eat some chocolate maybe? How important is it for you to do something about how you are feeling?

And if you don't get yourself back to a better state, what's likely to happen? Perhaps you erupt over the tiniest thing, and then regret it afterwards.

## **A Bad Day for Your Child**

Now think about a bad day for your child. Perhaps his morning routine got messed up, the school bus had broken down and was replaced by a different one, they had to take a different route because of road works, his support person at school had just gone home sick and they had not yet been able to find a replacement. And the day just got worse after that, it was raining at playtime and all the children had to stay in, the noise in the classroom was unbearable, etc. You get the picture.

Somehow, heroically, he makes it through the day, and arrives home very stressed. How does he make himself feel better? Is it by spending some time alone, doing some hand flapping, watching the same bit of a DVD over and over, or engaging in some other activity that doesn't seem very productive? Do you let him?

It's important to understand that these may be possible coping strategies. A sudden increase in certain repetitive behaviors, and resistance to interruption, is sometimes an indication of loss of well-being. If you sense that your child is not in a good state, it is really important that you help them get back to a better state before you start making lots of demands of them. We are all more co-operative when we are in a good state.

## **How to Help With Well-Being**

Remember that children with autism have difficulties with social interaction, and having to deal with too many social demands (e.g. going to school), can be exhausting.

People with autism report that having some time alone can help. Other things that may help include:

- snacks;
- having access to favorite activities;
- doing familiar repetitive tasks;
- fewer demands of them;
- laughter;
- physical exercise;

It's important to teach your child strategies to manage their own well-being, but this may be a long process. In the meantime, you will need to monitor their well-being and help them to stay at a good level.

### **Time to Be On Their Own – Have Low Social Demands**

Children with autism have difficulties with social understanding by definition. Researchers say that the autistic brain isn't hard-wired for social information the same way as the neuro-typical brain. People with autism have to work hard to process social information that the rest of us understand instinctively. It can be exhausting! So, ensure your child has time each day to be on their own, or with low social demands.

### **After School Snacks**

Schools make many demands of all children, and children with autism have the additional social demands to deal with too. It's no wonder that some children have meltdowns when they get home – they just about manage to hold it together at school, but eventually they have to explode. If your child

is like this, make sure you give them some time immediately after school to do their own thing so they can calm themselves.

If your child always seems to erupt when he gets home from school try this: feed them, and don't talk to them when they first come home from school. Let them eat in peace, and have the space and time to unwind before you make any demands of them, or ask them what they did at school.

#### **Time to Do What They Love Multiple Times a Day**

We tend to feel better immediately after doing something we like – e.g. eating chocolate, yum! However, the effect does not last long. So to maximize the good feeling, we could eat a small amount several times during the day, rather than eating a lot in one go. Likewise, instead of giving your child a long time at a favorite activity, try shorter periods several times a day – this is easier if the activity has a natural ending. Try the same thing with favorite snacks.

#### **Do What Is Familiar/Repetitive**

It's great to get your child to try new things. However, when your child is already anxious, they may be less receptive to new tasks, as this can cause more anxiety. Giving them a more familiar task may help to lower their anxiety levels – when they are in a better space you can try the new work again. Also letting them watch the activity being performed a few times first will help them to know what to do when it's their turn.

Doing familiar repetitive tasks can also help a child to calm.

#### **Make Fewer Demands**

We make demands of one another all the time. However, have you noticed that when you are not at your best, even reasonable demands can be very annoying? If your child is not in a good space, do your best to make fewer demands. This will give your child time to get into a better space, and you avoid the inevitable conflict that will arise when your child does not want to meet your very reasonable demands.

### **Shared Good Times**

Laughter is good for you, and good for your child. It releases all sorts of good hormones, and it helps form good memories. What's not to like? But do you ensure you have lots of shared good times? If not, let me be your excuse to.

### **Physical Exercise**

We all know that physical exercise is good for us, so I'm not going to labor the point, but at the same time most of us don't do enough of it, so I've included it here as another strategy to help your child to maintain their sense of well-being. Find a kind of physical activity that your child enjoys (or could learn to enjoy) and make it a part of their day. Regular physical activity has short term well-being benefits, as well as has long term health benefits.

## **Fizzy Drink, Raisins and Mentos Mints**

I said at the beginning of the chapter that I had enlisted some help, so let me introduce you to my helpers properly. Please meet: the bottle of fizzy drink, the raisins and the mentos mints.

Imagine you have a bottle of fizzy drink that you had accidentally shaken or dropped. Now imagine you are super thirsty and you really want to have a drink. Do you just take the lid off right away so you can have your drink? Or do you let it settle down first, gently loosening the lid to let the fizz escape slowly?

Now imagine you're with your child, and something has got them really fizzed up. And you're in a hurry. Do you continue to rush them, or do you give them time to settle and for the fizz to escape?

My guess is that you would wait for the fizzy drink to settle to avoid the mess. Clearing up the mess would take time and effort, so we wait. But are you as patient with giving your child time to settle when they are extra fizzy? Maybe the mess is not so obvious – or maybe for some children it is.

## **But I Haven't Got Time!**

It may seem you don't have the time, but if a meltdown happens, you have to find the time to deal with it somehow. So when you can, it's better to use the time pro-actively to avoid the meltdown, rather than re-actively to deal with it. Try to allow extra time if you need to go somewhere with your child, so that you don't have to rush.

## Super Fizzy Children

Now, I know that some children are just super fizzy all the time, and maybe your child is like this. And no amount of settling time is going to get them completely calm. This is where my raisins come in. Helped by the ever faithful bottle of fizzy drink.

Have you ever watched raisins dance? No? Try this, or watch the video on the [resources page](#): get a bottle of fizzy drink, open the lid and drop half a dozen raisins inside and watch. See the raisins bouncing up and down in the drink? Clever little things aren't they? They are dancing with the fizz.

Time to call on the last of my helpers, the mentos mints.

Watch the cool YouTube clip with the mentos mints, there's a link on the [resources page](#).

Or try it yourself (hint you might want to do this outside – it will get messy!): get an unopened bottle of diet fizzy drink and a pack of mentos mints. Set the bottle on the ground, take the lid off and put several mentos mints into the bottle as quickly as you can (you have about 2 seconds) and stand well back.

What you'll see is a spectacular eruption as the mentos mints help to release all the fizz – all at once.

***Moral – mentos mints and fizzy drinks don't mix. If something has made your child super fizzy, give them time to settle. If time doesn't reduce the fizz, don't be a mentos mint – be a raisin instead. Don't cause an eruption. Dance.***

# Chapter 6 - General Strategies

## **When to Teach**

Make it easy for your child to succeed. If teaching a new skill, do so at a time when your child is calm and is in a good state – i.e. their sense of well-being has been taken care off. Also think carefully about the situations and the environments, e.g. if you are teaching your child to wait, then don't start by trying in the middle of McDonald's at lunch-time.

## **Be Patient – Allow Enough Time**

Children with autism tend to be more anxious than the rest of us, because of what we talked about in the last chapter. If you want your child to learn something, making them anxious is not going to help. If it's a new activity, or something that is important for your child to learn, make sure you have enough time not to have to rush. Better to go back to something rather than make your child anxious.

## **Environment**

Look at the environment from your child's point of view. Is it visually distracting? Is it too noisy? Are there favorite activities in view that make it impossible for your child to concentrate on the activity in hand? What can you do to make the environment easier for your child to successfully engage in what you have asked them to do?

## **Clear and High Expectations**

Children will test boundaries, children with autism are not going to be any different. Decide which behaviors are acceptable to you and which are not, and then create clear boundaries, ensure that the rest of the family is also clear and that you all act with consistency. However, be realistic, e.g. your child with autism, by definition, has difficulties with social interaction – you will have to make some allowances. Use written rules, and have them displayed where your child can see them frequently.

When boundaries and expectations are clear – it can really help your child, because they have a sense of certainty. When they are not clear, that's when they're more likely to test. Know also what is reasonable for you to enforce. Do not create a boundary that you are unable or unlikely to enforce consistently – it just gives your child confusing messages.

High expectations are great, but unrealistic ones are a recipe for disaster. You know your child, base your expectations on what you know, rather than what you wish.

## **Your Reaction Is SO Important**

If you regularly engage in Intensive Play with your child, and they enjoy playing with you, a natural way to minimize your child's tendency to push boundaries is to simply stop the interaction whenever an inappropriate behavior occurs and calmly wait for more appropriate behavior before continuing.

Your child with autism may not necessarily care to act in a way that pleases you just for the sake of pleasing you. However, they may well be very interested in your reactions – and a purple screaming face can be just as interesting as a beaming smile, perhaps more so. So, put all your energies into making extreme whoops of delight when you are pleased with your child's behavior, and make the minimum of fuss when they engage in behaviors that are unacceptable to you. Practice being boring when your child behaves in a way that is not appropriate.

Sometimes children work out which of your buttons to press to get an interesting response, perhaps by accident initially, and then persist in trying to get those responses because they find them so interesting.

*Johnny, aged 5, was adorable and very active. He often engaged in activities that seemed designed to get a response from adults, these included: shouting loudly, ripping books, and urinating on the floor. Typically adults addressed Johnny's behavior by telling him "no shouting", "no ripping", etc. However, this did not appear to have much impact on stopping the behavior, if anything it sometimes made Johnny even more excitable, and he would repeat "no shouting", over and over again loudly, while laughing.*

What made a difference with Johnny was having clear boundaries and enforcing them with the minimum of fuss. Rather than telling him "no ..." whenever he did something he should not do, I gave him clear positive directions he could follow, e.g. "Johnny, come here", "sit down". I kept my voice and face as neutral as possible. When Johnny was calm I would then address the behavior, I found that this resulted in far fewer excitable responses from Johnny.

Most of his inappropriate behaviors disappeared in class in the course of a few weeks because he was no longer getting the interesting adult reactions he had been used to.

We all have different buttons – knowing what yours are and thinking about them before your child pushes them, gives you the opportunity to come up with a plan for reacting. If you don't have a plan, you're likely to react in a way that is going to make sure the button gets pressed again and again.

Sometimes children find a way to play a game at our expense, and then persist in playing it:

*Steven, aged 7, enjoyed playing chasing games. He would often run off and giggle when adults ran after him to bring him back. A number of strategies were tried, including giving Steven lots of attention when he was not running away, and very little attention after he had run off. However, Steven's running off behavior persisted.*

*What eventually worked was to ignore the running away behavior, using a second adult to monitor his safety from a distance, and wait for him to return – even if it took ten minutes. When it became clear to Steven that we really were not going to chase after him, the behavior lessened. After that whenever Steven started to run off, I would cheerfully shout out “Bye Steven” and wave – as soon as he heard this he would turn and come back. Not much fun playing chase unless someone is chasing you!*

Please bear in mind that this was within the safety of a school's grounds and I had the support of another adult – I'm not suggesting for a minute that you ignore your child running off if you can't ensure their safety.

Of course, you will want to reward your child for when they are behaving appropriately. Remember though that your child may not be as motivated by pleasing you as they are by getting access to a favorite toy.

If you have been engaging in Intensive Play with your child, perhaps a suitable reward may be a favorite game that you play together. This would be ideal as you would be rewarding appropriate behavior in a way that also teaches that social interaction is fun. Whatever the reward, for it to be meaningful, it has to be something that your child likes and not what you think they should have. You can always pair it with social rewards such as praise, so that over time your child develops a positive association with praise.

## **Learning Styles**

All of us, whether we have autism or not, have a preferred learning style: some people are visual learners and learn best when information is presented visually, others are more auditory, yet others are kinesthetic and learn best when they can move their bodies to physically practice what they are learning. Children with autism also vary in their learning styles, but whereas most of us are able to take in information reasonably well in our non-preferred modes, a child with autism may much more strongly prefer one mode over the others. Many children with autism, as we said earlier, seem to be very visual learners.

This is worth bearing in mind when you are teaching your child, and it's important to remember that they may have a very uneven skills profiles as well. If your child is not able to understand something you are teaching, try making it more visual. However, if you are already presenting the information in a visual way without success, try adding the kinesthetic mode as well.

## **Using Your Child's Interests**

Children with autism can develop very strong interests, if you can tap into that interest and use it when teaching your child, the whole experience will be so much more enjoyable for both of you. For example, many children with autism are very interested in computers – so make use of them. Find a program that your child likes and then exploit that interest, use it as a reason for your child to learn to use the mouse if they haven't already. Once they have mastered how to use the mouse, they are more likely to be interested in using other programs on the computer. But do start with one that they are very motivated by, even if you think another program may have more educational value – without motivation, there probably isn't much learning going on anyway, and the last thing you want to do is put your child off from learning.

If your child is always bouncing round the room, you might be tempted to think that you won't be able to teach them anything until they have learned to sit and attend. However, the beauty of using highly motivating things to begin with, is that your child is more likely to sit and attend to these out of interest, rather than just because you want him or her to do it.

## **Repetition**

For many children with autism, familiarity seems to bring with it interest. Obviously you want to give your child a wide variety of experiences, but don't be afraid to allow some overlearning by repeating things.

It should be fairly easy to judge whether your child responds well to familiarity: if he or she seems to show more interest each time you do an activity, it is worth building in a level of repetition. Some children may not even seem to be taking any interest at all the first few times you try something, but then suddenly they join in on, say, the fourth time you try it.

*Craig, whom we talked about earlier, really liked familiar things, and often chose to do the same activities over and over. When we introduced a new activity in class he would show no interest at all the first few times. However, after a few more exposures to the activity, he would suddenly become interested and would then actually choose to do that activity if it was left out in the classroom. Had we decided after a couple of times that he was not interested, we would never have got to the point where he was widening his range of activities.*

However, sometimes your child really may not be interested. So you need to be aware of that too. As the saying goes, if at first you don't succeed try, try, try again. However, it's just as important to know when to quit!

Some of your child's interests may seem rather random, but quite often they are just the things he has been exposed to repeatedly. Rather than just feeding his current interest (although there should be some of that), use it to widen his area of interest. Give your child regular exposure in non-threatening ways to things that you want your child to become interested in – e.g. numbers and letters when they are young. Have things in the environment that will support you in doing that – posters, books, whatever your child is interested in, and guide that interest towards what you want them to learn.

## **Transition Rituals**

Transitions often create an emotional spike. Visuals can help, and so can countdowns. Warnings that the activity will end soon, accompanied by a timer, can also be useful. When I say “transition ritual” all I mean is that you do something the same way each time, so that the routine becomes expected and safe – something as simple as always saying “5, 4, 3, 2, 1, finished” at each transition (whether needed or not) can make a big difference.

*We used 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, finished, in class consistently during transitions at school, and Harry responded really well to it. One afternoon while his mum was talking to me in class before taking him home, Harry picked up an umbrella and was busy opening and closing it. A few minutes later when his mum tried to take it off him, he was not willing to hand it over. One of my colleagues walked over to Harry and said, “5, 4, 3, 2, 1, umbrella finished,” and he instantly handed it over.*

I wish I could say that it worked this well with every child, all the time, but it is something worth trying if you are prepared to do it consistently. There’s something in the consistency that helps with the transition.

## **Keep Your Language Simple**

Because most of us find language so easy, when we communicate, we typically use lots of words, and we expect the other person to pick out the important messages from what we have said. If they fail to understand, we tend to give them more verbal examples, to try and help them understand. To a child with autism, this may be extremely unhelpful, particularly if he or she has processing delays – they may still be trying to process what we originally told them when we suddenly assault them with yet more words to process. If that happens they may give up trying to process what you said originally to deal with this new message. If you've ever tried learning a new language you will have some idea what this may feel like.

Keep your sentences at a level that your child can cope with, and be aware that at different times this level may well vary. For example, in more stressful situations your child may find it more difficult to cope with even fairly short sentences. However, this is so much easier said than done! Most of us find language so natural, and so easy to use, that we have to be very deliberate and conscious of our own speaking in order to use fewer words. Like everything else, it takes practice – it may help for you to have a few visual reminders of your own!

As well as using shorter sentences, try to ensure that your child has enough time to process what you have said. This is also much more difficult than it sounds, and the temptation to give another direction when your child has failed to respond to the initial one may be too much. However, if your child really does take longer to process information and you are conscious of this, then it does get easier with practice. It may help to make yourself count slowly to 10 before you say anything else, if you think your child needs extra time to process verbal information.

Remember also that children with autism tend to take things literally as they may not have the social awareness and flexibility of thought to figure out what is meant. Consider for a moment the ambiguous ways in which language is commonly used, and you'll appreciate how sophisticated most children are in figuring out what is meant, and equally how difficult it must be for children with autism to understand what we mean.

*Simon got a mountain bike for Christmas and was very happy with it. However, a few days after Christmas his mum noticed that he still had not used it. Puzzled, she asked him why not. To which he replied: "it's a mountain bike, and there are no mountains".*

When speaking to your child, take care to be explicit with your language so that there is less chance of misunderstanding. If you ask a question such as "would you like to ...", please do not be surprised if the answer is a straight "no". Unless you are asking a genuine question, it is much better to give a clear direction. Say what you mean!

## **Social Demands on Learning**

Reduce the social demands when teaching your child something. Is it really necessary for them to look at you when you are talking? Does that make the task easier or harder for your child? Are you expecting your child to share equipment, take turns, etc. as well as learn a new activity? Could your child learn the activity first before you expect them to incorporate these social aspects into it?

Does it really help if you talk at the same time? Or is it just another bit of sensory information that your child has to process when they are trying hard to learn a new skill?

## **Teach One New Thing at a Time**

It may seem rather obvious to say teach one new thing at a time. However, it is not as obvious as it may appear to be. Those of us who do not have autism can find it difficult to appreciate just how much the triad of impairments can make every-day learning situations difficult. For example, working with two other people may be a completely different situation for a child with autism than working with one. Using different materials to do the same task may be a whole new situation for some children with ASD.

Of course, you may find that your child is much more able to deal with changing situations than this, but if they are struggling with a new task, it is useful to consider if something else has also changed from their perspective, that makes it impossible for them to concentrate on the task in hand. It is a good idea to allow some overlearning of tasks using a range of materials, and in different situations.

## **Chapter 7 - Behavior Concerns**

As a teacher, the thing that parents spoke to me about most often was behavior challenges. Often the most pressing difficulties related to aggressive behavior and behavior that resulted in self-injury or injury to others. However, behavior challenges come in all different forms, and, as a parent of a child with autism, you have probably already faced more than your share of them.

In this short chapter you will not get all the answers you are looking for, but I want to give you some new ways to think about the behavior challenges you are facing that will help you to come up with your own solutions.

Your first reaction to a difficult behavior might be: “how do I stop this”. However, it may be more useful to ask a couple of other questions:

- What could my child do instead?
- What resources would my child need in order to behave better?

But before that, let’s look at why the behavior may be occurring in the first place.

## **What's The Reason for The Behavior?**

Your child may have challenging behavior for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes the behavior may be under their control to some extent, sometimes they may have very little control. Some of the things that we talked about when we looked at well-being in Chapter 5 will help, but no matter what you do, there will be times when your child engages in behavior that is a challenge for you to manage.

So what are some of the reasons that may result in a child with autism engaging in challenging behavior? What are the likely reasons for your child? Here are some things that could be a trigger:

- frustration;
- fear;
- feeling out of control;
- pain;
- sensory overload;
- wanting to be left alone;
- you are in the way of something they want;
- loss of well-being.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, I am sure you could easily add to it – and you should, make a note of the likely triggers for your child. It is useful to think about the reasons for the behavior rather than just trying to address the behavior itself. Knowing the likely triggers means that you can be proactive rather than reactive. It also means that you can teach your child better ways of managing themselves in those situations.

One way to look at challenging behavior is to consider it a form of communication. Most of us have many ways to communicate our needs, fears, and emotional states, and in any case we have enough social understanding to stop short of extreme behaviors. However, your child with autism may not have the means to communicate appropriately, or the social understanding to realize that their behavior is unacceptable.

No matter how well you know your child, it is often a matter of guesswork trying to understand the underlying communication behind a behavior – unless they are able to tell you. Sometimes it may be obvious what the communication is, at other times you may have no idea. Don't discount your parental instincts though, you probably know more than you realize consciously.

Later in this chapter we will look at teaching your child some better strategies so that they are less likely to resort to challenging behavior as a communication tool. However, in the meantime, you still have to deal with these outbursts, so let's look at some strategies that may help.

## **What Would You Like Your Child To Do Instead?**

It's completely understandable, your child is doing something that you don't like, or worse is actually dangerous, and you just want them to stop. So, the question you are most likely to ask yourself is: How can I stop this behavior? However, it's much easier for your child to stop doing something if there is something else they can do instead. What need is being met by your child doing what they are doing? Can they get that another way?

So when your child is behaving in a way that is unacceptable, ask yourself, what could my child do instead?

## **What Resources Would Your Child Need to Behave Well?**

If your child could communicate to you exactly what they needed to behave well, they would probably already be doing so. If they are not able to, you have to work it out for them. In the situations where the problem behavior happens, what resources would your child need to behave appropriately? Is it something to keep their hands busy like a fiddle toy? Is it something to keep the noise at a manageable level? Is it something to chew on? Is it something to listen to? Is it a book they can read? Is it somewhere quiet they can go?

When you have an idea what it might be, have it available in those situations, and offer the thing your child needs **BEFORE** the behavior starts. Before? That's right, behaviors seldom come out of the blue, as a parent you will know the little signs that your child gives off just before the behavior starts. You know, those little signs that make you tense up and wait for the fall-out. And if it's too late already by the time your child gives off these little signs, go back a bit and look for the signs that come before these. If in doubt get in early, so that your child has the resources before he needs them.

## **What Can You Do to Help?**

First of all, have a good think about whether the behavior really is a problem. Is there an actual cost to your child, or other people, associated with the behavior, or is it just something unusual that you'd rather they didn't do? Perhaps the behavior just presses one of your buttons, and it's not a problem for anyone else?

There's a limit to how many behaviors you can address at the same time. So prioritize, start with the behaviors that you can't ignore, and live with the others for now. That way you can see progress more easily, and you have more time to engage in interacting with your child rather than just trying to manage behaviors. Think how you would feel if someone was trying to change all your behaviors at once, and everything you did was unacceptable. As the saying goes, pick your battles.

It may be hard for your child to change the behavior in question, especially if it has been happening for a while; it may be much quicker and easier to change your own behavior. So start by looking at whether you can do any of the following:

- change how you react;
- change the environment;
- change your child's focus;
- change the consequences of the behavior.

Whatever you decide to do, do it early. The longer a behavior is in place, the harder it is to change.

### **Have a Plan for Reacting**

When your child engages in challenging behavior it is difficult to give a calm reaction. You naturally react to what you see: which could be disgust, horror, anger, etc. Because these are natural reactions, they are difficult to control. You may then instinctively follow through with actions that you would not choose if you had time to think about them beforehand.

The problem is that your initial response may actually make it more likely that your child will engage in the behavior again (because it got an interesting reaction), and your subsequent action may have made the situation even worse. And again, it may have made the behavior more likely to occur again.

So take the time to think about the behavior and make a plan for reacting. Discuss it with other family members and agree to all follow that plan. Then when the behavior happens, you at least have a chance to over-ride your natural reaction with your planned response. In the heat of the moment, when your problem solving skills may not be at their best - you don't have to think about what to do, you just follow your plan.

#### **Environment – What Changes Can You Make?**

Does the environment contribute to the behavior happening? Are there changes that you would be willing to make to the environment that will help with the behavior? Why make things difficult if there is an easy way? Sorting your environment means that you can focus on teaching skills rather than dealing with the behavior – and you can gradually work towards a less restrictive environment so that your child is able to function well in places where you have less control. However, if all you do is fire-fight because the environment is not supporting your child to do the right thing, then you will have much less time and effort for teaching your child other skills.

#### **Change Your Child's Focus – Distraction and Diversion**

Once a child is very upset, it can be very difficult to calm them down. It is best to distract or divert them before they get to the point of being upset. If you know that your child always makes a bee-line for the candy-aisle in the supermarket and then gets very upset because they want to eat as much of their favorite candy as they can, right there in the store, your job is to make sure they do not reach the candy-aisle – because no matter how upset they get with you for diverting them, they are going to be a whole lot more upset when you try to take the candy bars out of their hands once they get there.

*Tim was 16 years old, over six foot tall and very strong. At certain times in the day he would try and march over to the dining-hall to get*

*food. Once inside he would get very upset that it was not time to eat, he would then hit out at whoever was with him or try to bite them. If anyone tried to stop him from entering the dining hall he would just push them out of the way.*

*Once we had established the times of day the behavior was likely to occur, we made sure that as much as possible he was nowhere near the dining-hall at those times. With no opportunity to go to the dining-hall easily, much of the associated violent behavior stopped. On the occasions when Tim was near the dining-hall at these times, perhaps because it was raining and we were confined to the cabin, we were able to divert him away from the dining-hall whenever he made a move towards it. Again, not giving him the opportunity of reaching the site where the violent behavior was most likely to occur.*

By diverting him away from the dining-hall at these key times, not only did these violent episodes cease, but Tim eventually stopped trying to get to the dining-hall at all, except at mealtimes when it was appropriate obviously.

### **Change the Consequences**

What is the consequence of the behavior, in other words, what is your child getting out of it? If your child always gets something he likes out of behaving the way he does, then he is likely to keep behaving the same way. Sometimes it's more obvious, e.g. if we were to give a child some candy to calm them down. However, it may be that the thing your child "likes" is to get out of doing something he doesn't like. Or it may be that the thing he "likes" is the way your face looks when you are cross and steam is coming out of your ears. Or it may be that people leave him alone when he behaves that way, or he gets taken somewhere quiet.

I'm not saying that your child is aware of this consciously, although they might be. I'm just saying that the consequences, however unintended, may be something to look at as possible fuel for the behavior.

## **Gradual Changes**

Changes are inevitable, but often they can cause upset. If you know your child has difficulties with change, try to bring changes in gradually and with prior warning. Talk the change through with your child, use visual symbols or put the change on the visual schedule. Have a motivating reward available for your child once they accept the change, so that they can associate the change with something positive.

Having said that, sometimes children can cope better with a big change than a small change, e.g. it may be easier to introduce a whole new activity, than to try to change the routine of an existing one. Again, it depends on your child. How have they been with big changes in the past?

Warnings and visuals generally help though, whether you go for small gradual changes, or a big change.

## **Teach Flexibility – Have a Mantra for Things Changing**

But not all changes can be gradual or planned. Surprises happen. Things get changed. Plans don't work out. How does your child react in these situations? If it doesn't seem to concern them, then great, that's one less thing you need to worry about. However, if like many children with autism, your child finds sudden changes difficult, then you can help by teaching them that things do sometimes change.

And if you're going to teach about surprise, it's best to do it in a situation that you've engineered so that you have more control. When the surprise happens outside of your control, you may not be in the best position to react.

Introduce a surprise or change card for your child's schedule. Every now and then put it on the schedule, and introduce a pleasant or neutral surprise. When your child is able to cope with these, put in surprises that they may find a little upsetting and teach them strategies to cope with these.

Develop a mantra to use when things change, write it up and put it in a Social Story or stick it on the wall. Use a wording that works for you and your child, use humor if appropriate, but the message will be along the lines of "things change, but it's okay."

## **Rehearsal**

New situations can be difficult, as can situations that your child does not like. Telling your child what to expect beforehand, especially if you support it with visuals, can really help. Try using a Social Story to explain what is likely to happen and how your child could respond.

Try practicing or role-playing the situation, e.g. prepare for a visit to the dentist by playing with a dental mirror and getting your child used to opening their mouth to be examined. If you do this gradually and make it fun, your child may be happier to let the dentist examine them than if they have no idea what to expect. You can also take photos of your child when you are role-playing, or practicing, and put these into a book about going to the dentist, or whatever the situation is.

## **Giving Positive Directions**

When your child is upset, their ability to process information is going to be further impaired. If you are giving directions, pare down what you say to the absolute minimum. When nothing else is making sense, it is possible that a short familiar direction will. This is what I have found in practice with some children. In the middle of a violent upset, they are still able to process and comply with limited positive directions – by positive I mean only that they are instructions to do something rather than not to do something: “hands down” as opposed to “stop hitting”. Back to Tim:

*Before we had worked out the strategy of keeping Tim away from the dining hall at those key times, we were dealing daily with a very upset 16 year old trying to get access to the dining hall.*

*The natural response of barring his access to the door was not terribly effective as Tim was so strong. However, we quickly realized that if he was sitting down, he was much less likely to try for the door. We positioned a chair near the door to the dining-hall and made sure we always beat Tim to the door. Once Tim arrived at the door, we gave him a very clear instruction “Tim sit down”. This usually worked, and Tim would stay in the seat for a couple of minutes before trying to get up. If he stood up, we would again repeat “Tim sit down”. If Tim started to wave his hands in the air, or to hit his head with his hands, we gave the instruction “Tim hands down”.*

*Sometimes, Tim would start to calm down while sitting in the chair, at other times he would remain very upset. While one person waited with Tim, giving him positive directions when needed, a colleague went to fetch cookies and a drink. Tim’s violent behavior was communicating that he was hungry, so we wanted to attend to that, without rewarding the behavior by letting him into the dining-hall and thereby making it more likely that he would repeat the behavior in the future.*

## Teaching Your Child Better Strategies

All children, particularly when they are young, get upset and express it. However, children with ASD often continue to express their upsets loudly, and sometimes violently, well beyond when most other children learn to use more socially appropriate strategies.

Sometimes it may be obvious what your child is upset about, they may be able to tell you or to show you. At other times, upsets can occur for no obvious reason, and you are left wondering what happened.

If you know the source of the upset, removing it may help to calm your child down. Sometimes it is just best to avoid situations that you know your child is going to find difficult. However, at other times this is not possible, or is not really practical. So, we need to look at situations that are mildly upsetting as potential learning opportunities.

Many children with ASD are non-verbal, and for these children it is clear that their inability to communicate verbally can lead to frustration and upset. However, communication difficulties are at the core of autism, so don't assume that just because a child can speak, they will be able to communicate their upset in a calm, measured way. Their instinctive reaction to a situation may be to scream, run off or hit out. We have to teach alternative strategies, some of which may be appropriate for a wide range of situations, while some may be more situation-specific.

Make sure any new strategies immediately give your child better results than the behavior you are trying to replace. As tempting as it is, don't rush. Let your child experience success in using the new strategy before you start to move them on.

### Teaching "No"

"No" is a very useful word, and is much more appropriate than screaming, running off or hitting out. Teach it in situations where your child may get **mildly** upset (do not try to teach anything when your child is very upset – it seldom works).

For example if your child screams every time you offer them an apple, but you know that they are not really that upset, keep the apple there while you say “no apple”, and wait to see if they repeat it. If they say it, then remove the apple, saying “no apple” as you do so. If they do not say it after a few seconds, remove it anyway, saying “no apple”. Do this consistently, so that over time your child starts to associate the word “no” as being the thing that makes what they don’t want go away, rather than their screaming.

If your child is not yet speaking, you can teach them to use an alternative system, perhaps of pointing to “no” on a card with the words “yes” and “no” printed on it. Or you can teach them to hand over a card that says “no”. Make sure you reward the appropriate communication by responding to it, and not responding to the inappropriate behavior.

Once your child has learned to say “no” to things, try to respect the “no” as often as you can to begin with – you want them to be motivated to use this strategy rather than the screaming strategy they were using before! If you try to rush it, your child is likely to abandon this new strategy and go back to the one that worked previously.

When you think your child is now using the new strategy consistently, you can then try pushing them just a little, e.g. “No apple? Okay, little bit then finished”.

It is also worth teaching the word “yes”, as this will increase your child’s ability to communicate their needs. It also allows you to get feedback from your child if you are trying to guess a request they are unable to communicate.

### **Teaching How to Wait**

Children often get upset because they want something and become impatient for it. They just may not get the concept of waiting, and if you think about it from your child’s point of view, waiting doesn’t make much sense. Most things we ask children to wait for are for social reasons: it’s snack time soon (*but I know that the cookies are in the tin now!*), it’s not

your turn yet (*but the computer is already on and I want it now!*); we'll go to the park later (*but I know it's there now - let's go!*).

However, waiting is a life skill, and one that your child simply has to learn, otherwise they are going to be upset a lot – and you are going to be very busy dealing with those upsets. So as difficult as this may be for your child (and you), there's no getting away from it, your child has to learn to wait.

To begin teaching this concept choose situations where your child wants something and then artificially telling them to “wait” for a few seconds before giving it to them. It may be helpful to have something concrete you can hand over to your child while they wait, for example a card with the word “wait” written on it. When the waiting time is over, take back the “wait” card and give your child the item they wanted.

It's important to teach your child to be successful from the start, by only asking them to wait for a few seconds – the aim is that your child learns that waiting means that they will get the item by the passing of time alone, and that there is nothing else they need to do. If you make your child wait too long, they are almost certain to resort to using strategies that they know work (e.g. screaming, grabbing, hitting out, etc.), and then associate this behavior, instead of the waiting behavior, with successfully getting what they wanted.

So start with extremely short wait times, and when your child seems to understand that there is nothing they need to do other than wait, and that “wait” means they will get it very soon, then very gradually make the wait time very slightly longer. Using a visual will generally help your child to understand. And give them LOTS of practice at being successful.

Eventually, your child will begin to accept that “wait” means that they can have the item, but not just yet.

If you have been trying unsuccessfully to teach your child to wait, but haven't tried it this way, give it a go. And if this way sounds painfully slow, just ask yourself how long you've been trying it your way.

**Note:** If you are teaching your child to wait, do not start by asking them to wait for their most favorite thing in the world – chances are they will find it too difficult. Start with something your child likes and wants, but is not absolutely desperate for.

### **Teaching “Help”**

Does your child know when and how to ask for help? The second part of this question is easiest to answer. If your child has a way of asking for help, that’s great; if not, you need to teach them a way. Again visual tools can help, even if your child can speak – knowing that they have a visual that they can give someone can make it more likely that they will ask for help. If nothing else, it reminds them that they need to go find someone to give the visual to. The visual should be easy to recognize and immediately to hand wherever they are.

Engineer situations where your child has to ask for help, e.g. sabotage equipment by putting in dead batteries, put a password on the computer, put the screw top lid on very tight (assuming you are stronger than your child), etc. Get another child or adult to model asking for help and handing over the visual to someone who can help.

If you’re thinking, but I don’t want to upset my child by sabotaging things, he gets upset enough as it is! I do understand. However, if your child is likely to get upset when that happens, then there is all the more reason for you to engineer the situations when you are teaching this skill. When you use sabotage, you are in control – you can choose to do it at a time when your child is in a good state, in an environment that supports you, when you have distractors available, etc.

If you wait for these situations to happen naturally, you have no control over when they may happen – and Murphy’s Law dictates that they will occur when you are in the middle of something else and are least able to help immediately, or when your child is already upset, or when you don’t have a distractor to hand, etc. So, be creative in your sabotage and, if possible, even make it a little fun – you want your child to know that if they

can't do something, help is available, it's not the end of the world, and they have a way to ask.

Once your child has a way of asking for help, give them lots of practice in different situations so that they learn to generalize the skill. Remember generalizing does not come naturally for many children with autism.

### **Teaching Functional Communication using PECS**

If your child is not yet verbal, they may become frustrated and upset when they are not able to communicate their wants and needs. Your child may have some strategies which they use quite well, for example dragging you across the room to the thing they want you to get, but what if they want something that is not in the room? One intervention I have found useful with a number of non-verbal children I have worked with is The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) [www.pecs.com](http://www.pecs.com).

PECS is a systematic program to teach children about communication with other people, by making use of the things they are most motivated by – engagement again. It begins by teaching children to exchange a picture card of something they want for that item. The beauty of teaching the “exchange” is that children have to find someone to exchange the card with. PECS teaches the child an effective strategy for making requests that does not involve the child getting upset.

To begin with, while the child is learning the system, all requests are honored. When the child is using the new strategy confidently, they will be expected to understand that sometimes they have to wait, and sometimes the item is unavailable.

*Mark, aged 6, had very little language and did not communicate his needs verbally. He had very clear ideas about what he wanted to do, and would get equipment from different parts of the classroom to do his activities. Quite often this would involve him climbing to reach things, which had safety implications. I made symbol cards for all the bits of equipment he was using from around the room, and showed him that we would get them for him if he requested them using his*

*PECS book. Instantly he started making his requests of all the different adults in the room.*

The result of this was that the climbing behavior stopped completely; Mark was now initiating interactions with all the adults on a frequent basis daily; and each time he made a request of an adult he had the opportunity of practicing his speech in a motivating context. What makes this system work so well is that its starting point is what the child is already motivated by.

*Mark's language developed well after that, and increasingly he was able to make verbal requests without having to use his PECS book, but it was always there to support him when he needed it. He was in control of it, and could use it or not. Our only interest was that he had a way of communicating his needs in a way that made sense to a range of people, PECS gave him that while he needed it.*

One of the downsides of using PECS is the problem of having the PECS cards to hand when your child needs them. However, if you have a iPhone or iPad, etc. there are now a multitude of apps that help with using PECS type systems.

### **Graduated Thinking**

Children with autism tend to think in terms of things being black or white, good or bad, success or fail. They may not think in shades of grey, of something being quite good or quite bad, of something being a reasonable success, etc. Now, thinking in black and white isn't always bad, it may mean that your child tries very hard to do things correctly and has high standards. However, if things aren't perfect, then they can take quite an emotional hit needlessly.

If your child is like this, teach them to grade experiences on a scale, e.g. 1 to 5. Doing this helps your child understand that things are relative, and gives you a way to teach about appropriate emotional responses in different situations. A book that you may find helpful is *The Incredible 5-Point Scale* by Kari Dunn Baron and Mitzi Curtis – you will find a link on the [resources page](#).



## **If All Else Fails**

Sometimes the only way to stop your child's upset, or inappropriate, behavior is to give them what they want or taking away what they don't want. Unfortunately, the trouble with removing the source of the upset while your child is still upset, or of giving your child the thing they are screaming for, is that this is likely to reinforce the behavior, and they are more likely to repeat it. So, if it is not too distressing for you or your child, it is often best to wait until the upset subsides before giving them what they want. Obviously this is not always possible, and there are many situations, particularly when you are away from home, when you just have to do whatever you can to calm your child down as quickly as possible.

However, afterwards think about how you can turn this situation into a future opportunity for teaching your child an appropriate strategy to deal with the upset. Think about some of the strategies mentioned above. Is it a situation where it would be useful for your child to be able to communicate "no"? Or perhaps it is a situation where understanding about waiting would help? Or maybe it is a situation where they would be helped by being able to make a request? Here is an example where teaching wait was the learning opportunity.

*Alex, aged 7 and non-verbal, would get very upset if his food was not on his plate when he arrived in the dining hall. He would clench his fists and beat his head hard, or he would fall on the floor and scream. Initially, the strategy we used was to keep him out of the dining hall until we knew the food was already on his plate. However, this could not work as a long-term strategy – Alex would have to learn to wait.*

*On the first day that we started to teach him to wait, Alex arrived in the dining-hall to an empty plate and was told to "wait", but before he could make a fuss, food was put on his plate. The time he had to wait was gradually built up and after a few weeks, Alex was able to wait his turn appropriately, sometimes up to several minutes.*

Sometimes your child may get so upset that even giving them what they want doesn't help. If your child gets to this point, there is probably not

much you can do except wait it out, and do your best to ignore the unhelpful stares of onlookers. Obviously it is better to distract or divert to avoid getting to this point, but if a meltdown does happen make sure you give your child enough time to calm down properly. Even if they look calm afterwards, the adrenaline will still be in their system for some time, so avoid actions and situations that will kick them over the edge again.

## **Obsessive Behavior Signs**

The third part of the triad is “rigidity of thought”. Children with autism have difficulties with understanding the world, and may engage in repetitive behaviors because they are predictable and comforting. For many children this is expressed in doing some activities over and over again, for others there may be a particular interest in certain things, for example train timetables.

As I said earlier, I advocate taking an active interest in what your child is interested in and as much as possible accepting it. If your child is fascinated by spinning a wheel, why not join in and see what happens? However, there are times when what your child is interested in is really not appropriate, or practical. For example, some children with autism like to have things arranged in a particular way and get extremely upset if something gets moved – this may include furniture, which can make it rather difficult for everyone else in the house.

We all like to have some kind of control over our world, so it is appropriate to allow your child some sort of control over parts of his or her world. However, try not to allow fixed patterns of behavior to build up that will cause major upsets if they are later changed. For example, on their visual schedule, introduce a “surprise” card sometimes and then do something different when that item comes up on the schedule. When going to familiar places, take lots of different routes (being sure to let your child know where they are going at the beginning of the trip and perhaps giving them a photo of the destination to hold), so that your child does not associate only one route with going to a certain place.

If your child is lining things up while they are playing, help them to put the things away when they are finished, so that your child does not expect to find them in the same place later on and get upset if they are not.

If your child starts insisting something has to be done a certain way, and this is proving disruptive, create a visual schedule just for that activity, which teaches them to do it in a way that works for you.

All children are different, some do not seem to get into routines or obsessive behaviors, while others become very dependent on routines and may be more likely to exhibit obsessive behaviors. If your child is likely to become over-dependent on routines, stop these routines happening before they have time to take hold – for some children this may only be two or three times, you probably already know if that is the case for your child. Alternatively, make sure you have an input into routines when they are being created, so that the routine works for you as well as your child, and build in as much flexibility as you can.

If your child exhibits obsessive behaviors, this may just be part of their personality and something you have to accept, however, you can help shape which behaviors they engage in repetitively. Behaviors that will be most disruptive if allowed to be done obsessively, can be distracted right from the beginning so they are less likely to take hold. Some obsessive behaviors may escalate over time, so it may also be useful to redirect your child away from these behaviors at an early stage – of course hindsight is a wonderful thing, and it is usually difficult in practice to know what behaviors will escalate. Take Fred for example:

*Fred used to pick up twigs from the floor and snap them in half. Left to himself he would happily do this for ages. He progressed to breaking off small twigs from the lower branches of trees. An effort was made at this point to redirect him away from breaking off twigs, but he was very persistent. However, he was only breaking off very small twigs, so it did not seem like a very big deal and there were other behaviors that we were more concerned about.*

*Unfortunately, this behavior then escalated to the point, when I saw him a few years later, of ripping off whole branches, and he had become even more persistent. With the benefit of hindsight, it would have been easier to have addressed the behavior when he was still at the stage of breaking small twigs.*

One strategy that can work well is to de-escalate your child's current behavior, this might involve only allowing your child to collect a certain

number of items at a time, or it might be to gradually reduce the size of the object. Two examples to illustrate:

*Carl was obsessive about colored beads. He always had some with him, either in his pockets or in his hands, and would become very upset if these were taken away from him, or if he lost them. He would also try and accumulate as many as he could, and having lots of beads in his hands and pockets affected his ability to do other activities. The strategy that was adopted was to only allow Carl to have 5 beads at a time, such a number could be easily pocketed if he needed to use his hands, and were so few in number that they would sit in his pocket easily. It also meant that once he had his 5 beads, he was less likely to be distracted by trying to find more. Carl continued to be very interested in his beads, but they were now much less likely to affect his ability to do other activities.*

*Derek was fascinated by ropes and belts, which he liked to twirl. He would make interesting twirling patterns with them, but in the process was a danger to others as he tended to swing the ropes quite fast. The strategy that was adopted with Derek was to exchange his ropes for smaller ones, so that they were less of a hazard to others. Derek would accept exchanges readily so long as there was not too big a size differential between the two.*

## Sleep

Many children with autism have difficulties sleeping through the night. Some will not want to go to sleep at night-time, others will want to get up very early, yet others will stay up late and rise early! Many parents report this issue as an area of difficulty, thankfully it does seem to get better with age for many children.

My own experience of this is from working at a summer camp for many years. Over the years I had many different children with autism in my cabin, but there was a core of a dozen children whom I worked with from when they were about 7 until they were in their late teens. When the children were between 7 and 10, we had probably the least sleep. We had 6 children in the cabin at a time and it was not uncommon for one or two of them to be up until 3 or 4am most nights. Equally common was for most of them to be awake from any time between 5 and 7am.

However, by the time the children were in their early teens it stopped being a problem for almost all of them, in fact some of the children would put themselves to bed as soon as we came back from the evening activity.

If you are struggling with getting your child to settle into bed at night, here are some suggestions that might help:

- Create a bed-time routine that your child enjoys and stick to it (make the routine be about the activities rather than about the person doing it – so if you are not available, someone else can put your child to bed).
- Use your visual schedule to reinforce the routine.
- Have a fixed bed-time, allow your child's body cycle to settle into a pattern.
- Make the last hour of the evening nice and calm, for the whole family if possible.
- Incorporate calm activities, e.g. looking at favorite books, listening to some gentle music.
- Make some favorite calm activities only available at bed-time (give your child a reason to want to go to bed).

- Use a night-light if it helps.
- Use thick curtains to block out light from outside (or black out blinds see [resources page](#)).
- Make sure that noises in the house are kept to a minimum – perhaps the sound of the TV in the lounge carries to your child’s bedroom and is keeping him or her awake.
- Keep the bedroom as distraction free as is possible, so that your child is not encouraged to get out of bed.
- Make sure that the room is safe for your child to be left in, so that even if he or she gets out of bed you do not have to worry about their safety.
- If you have to stay in the room so that your child will stay in bed, gradually move yourself further and further from the bed until you are waiting outside the room, and eventually not waiting at all.
- If your child gets up, take them by the hand and lead them back to bed, give them no other attention, be as boring as you can, try to avoid staying in the room if possible.
- Try to keep your child active during the day so that they are tired at the end of the day, but allow at least an hour of calm time before bed.

Some of these suggestions may make a difference, but it is also possible that your child will still not sleep very much despite all your best efforts. Allow enough time for any changes you make to take effect – sometimes it can take weeks of perseverance before there is a noticeable change in behavior.

If after having tried a number of different strategies you notice little or no change, or indeed if the situation gets worse and your child is sleeping less, consider consulting with your family doctor, or a specialist doctor that your child may already be seeing. It may be useful to rule out any possible medical reasons for your child not sleeping.

Whatever happens, try and get enough sleep yourself as difficult as that may be. Use whatever support networks you have to ensure you get some rest. Sleep issues may last for some time; they may also come and go.

It may be useful to separate issues to do with when and how your child sleeps from those that are more behavioral in nature. For example, is it a case of your child's sleep-wake cycle being out of sync with what you would like it to be, or have they just got used to you being there whenever they wake during the night and cannot now fall back to sleep without you stroking their hair, or lying down with them? If it is a matter of your child's cycle being out of sync then things like making sure you have a fixed bed-time may help. If it is more likely that your child has just got used to some behavior from you at bed-time or during the night, you may have to look carefully at how you respond to your child at these times and make gradual changes.

For a comprehensive guide to sleep issues, I recommend "Sleep Better: A guide to improving sleep for children with special needs" by V Mark Durand (see [resources page](#)).

## **Summary**

Changing behavior takes time, sometimes a long time, whatever you try, make sure you allow enough time for it to have an effect. Having a plan will keep you on track and make you more consistent, and the consistency will help your child. Be clear about what behaviors you are working on, and what you would like your child to do instead. Give your child the resources they need to behave well. And if you are currently dealing with a difficult behavior, remember that you have been successful in the past in helping your child with other behaviors. What strategies worked then? Could some of them be used to help with this situation?

## **Chapter 8 –Technology**

The pace of technological change over recent years is nothing short of astounding. The good news is that much of this new technology available to us is very appealing to children with autism. So, I felt this book would not be complete without at least a short chapter on how some of these devices can help your child.

## Using Computers

Many children with autism are fascinated by computers in all their various forms. So, rather than fight it, I say let's make full use of them.

Some people worry that children "playing" with the computer is unproductive. I say define what you mean by productive. Firstly, there is nothing wrong with playing. Secondly, where others may see only a child playing, I see engagement, excitement, joint attention, turn-taking (amazing how well children who find it hard to work with others can take turns on the computer with a bit of adult support), developing motor skills, creativity, following multiple step instructions (e.g. to find a particular file), learning from trial and error, etc.

And anyway, by deciding what programs and websites to introduce to your child, you can often steer them in a direction that you like. Your child may then choose to use those programs because they are familiar.

Computers can also be very calming for some children – there is no social pressure from a computer, it's logical, predictable and visual. For these reasons, if your child has had lots of social input, and needs some time to unwind, the computer may help with this.

However, having said that, the downside of computers is that they can also be very isolating. Some children will spend all their time on the computer, and shut everyone and everything else out. That's obviously something to avoid. So, unless you are deliberately giving your child some calming time on the computer, find ways to be involved when they use it, so that it is more of a joint experience. Point things out, make occasional observations, take turns – but don't overdo it, you want your child to enjoy having you there rather than experience you as a constant interruption.

## **Typing**

Many children with ASD find writing difficult, they just find the whole mechanics of holding a pencil and using it very challenging. If this sounds like your child, you may want to teach them to type first. You may find that your child who was not able to write anything with a pencil, may be able to type whole words quite easily once they master the keyboard – don't forget that the letters printed on a standard keyboard are in upper case just to make things more difficult! However, the children I've worked with generally have had little trouble with converting lower to upper case when finding the right key to press.

## **Computer Time**

Scheduling when to use the computer (or iPad or game console), may help with your child's tendency to want to use it for longer than you want them to use it. Having another motivating activity to move on to straight afterwards may help with the transition. Try to avoid going straight from something they love to something they would rather not do.

If you still struggle to get your child to stop at the appropriate time, there is a program called Computertime that automatically stops your child using the computer after an amount of time that you specify. You may find that your child accepts this more readily. There is also an app for the iPad or iPod called Timelock. (see [resources page](#)).

## Digital Cameras

How did we ever get by without digital cameras? They are truly wonderful, and are now so affordable. If you have access to a digital camera, use it. A lot. Most of the children I have worked with adore them. And if you don't have one, or the only one you have is on your very expensive smart phone, then I really suggest you buy a cheap one that you are happy to let your child use without worrying too much about them breaking it. They will learn so much by being able to use it themselves. You may also learn a little about how they see the world from the pictures they take.

It's important that the screen is big enough for your child to review the pictures easily, and most newer cameras now come with screens that are comfortable to view – if yours is very old and has a small screen, it may be worth spending the money to get one with a bigger screen.

Digital cameras have so many advantages over traditional film cameras. Here are just a few:

- the cost of using them can be very cheap (if you don't print many photos);
- you can easily view the photos in a larger size (e.g. by plugging the camera into your TV or downloading them onto a computer);
- you can easily use and manipulate the images, e.g. for making personalized books;
- digital cameras are on so many devices that you or someone you are with is likely to have one about their person;
- etc.

But the thing that I like about them most is that they give instant feedback. You can take a picture and show your child straight away, or talk about it later that day. That was just not possible with traditional cameras – by the time you finished the roll of film, took it to the shop and waited for it to be developed, days or weeks (or even months!) had gone by and the learning opportunity may have passed.

So take lots of photos, and let your child take lots of photos, and review them together. It will give you plenty of shared experiences to talk about. And make sure you take photos of every day experiences too, don't save the camera just for special occasions.

Make it a habit to transfer the pictures to your computer as soon as you can – that way you can look at the photos with your child on a bigger screen. This is often good for bringing about spontaneous speech and commenting from your child as they point to things in the pictures that they just saw being taken. And take your time when looking at the photos, your child may like to look at certain photos for longer – find out what it is about those pictures that they find so interesting.

If appropriate, you can also print off these digital images to make highly specific individual resources easily, e.g. flashcards for learning names and other vocabulary, or personalized books starring your child.

And don't neglect the video function! If a picture is worth a thousand words, then you can probably multiply that number many times over for video. Video takes up more memory than photos, so make sure you buy bigger memory cards – which are now reasonably priced and getting cheaper all the time.

Again, transfer the video clips to your computer to watch with your child. Video clips allow for commentary, either from you if you are modeling language, or from your child if they have some level of spoken language. You may find that your child has favorite video clips that they like to watch over and over again, if it's not a problem, let them watch until they are satisfied – most children will move on when they have got what they need from watching the same clip repeatedly.

Video clips are a great way to see progress over time as well. They can be a great way of giving information to professionals who may be working with your child, e.g. if you are dealing with a difficult behavior that only seems to happen at home, you can record it and show the professionals who are supporting you, so that they can see the behavior for themselves.

I said earlier that if your only camera was on your phone that you should get another one. However, that camera on your phone is wonderful to have (you just may not want your child to use it so freely). For a start, most of us now carry our phones with us everywhere - we're almost not fully dressed without them! – which means that you can take photos wherever you are. You could, for example, take photos of the most common places you take your child to so that when you are out, you can show the photo of where they are going to next on your phone.

## **iPads and Apps**

Many of my younger students with autism found learning to use the mouse difficult – they did all eventually get it, but for some it took a long time to make the connection between moving the mouse and what was happening on the screen. The wonderful thing about iPads and other tablets is that this is suddenly no longer a problem. Your child touches the iPad and something happens right there on the screen that they are touching – it's much more intuitive.

The other great thing is that there is a whole wealth of apps that are relatively inexpensive. So whatever you are working on with your child, whether it be cause and effect, shape matching, number recognition, spelling, communication, etc., there is, as they say, an app for it. If you want to know more about what kind of apps are available, I recommend you get the book *Apps for Autism* by Lois Jean Brady who has put them in useful categories (you'll find a link on the [resources page](#)).

Ipads are also extremely portable, so you can take them wherever you go – which is another big advantage over a desktop computer, and even a notebook. I do recommend getting some kind of protective case though, to minimize the risk of accidental damage.

Now, I don't want this to be an advertisement for Apple, and iPads are pretty expensive, but buying one could be a good investment for your child – at least take the time to research it.

Of course there are many other tablet devices other than the Apple ones, and these may suit your child better. However, it's the availability of apps that are suitable for your child that will probably be the deciding factor for you.

## **Final Thoughts**

I hope that I have given you plenty to think about and have sparked lots of ideas for you. As I have said throughout this book, each child is an individual, and not everything applies to every child, but I hope that the ideas have been general enough to apply to most children, whilst being specific enough to make a difference for you and your child.

Use whatever you find useful from this book, and from wherever else you do your research, but always remember that you know your child better than anyone else – read widely, take advice, but trust your instincts.

Whatever you try from here or elsewhere, please be patient, some strategies can take several weeks before they begin to work, and at first they may even seem to make things worse rather than better. Do not become despondent, most strategies will work if you are persistent and consistent.

Acknowledge yourself for the great job that you do, and remember to take care of yourself and not just your child. Looking after any child can be demanding, looking after a child with autism often comes with extra challenges. You can only do the best for your child if you look after yourself too. I know you know that, but have you been doing it? If not, let me be your excuse to, starting from now.

I would love to hear from you if you want to share your stories of success, or otherwise, or if you have any comments or suggestions.

Email me at: [alan@autismsparks.com](mailto:alan@autismsparks.com)

I wish you a wonderful and exciting journey with your child. More than anything I hope you remember to play.

## **Please Review**

If you have found this book useful, I would appreciate it if you would take a few minutes to write a quick review on Amazon. That would really help me to reach more parents. Thanks.

## **Suggestions for Further Reading**

See the [resources page](#) for a list of suggested books.

As well as the books I've referred to in this book, I've included a few others which I think you will find useful. I've kept the list deliberately short so that you are not overwhelmed, of course this means that there will be many excellent books that are not on this list.

I have included books on a range of issues that are often important to parents, including: toileting, sleeping, eating, behavior, social understanding, sensory issues and play. There are several books by authors with autism and/or their parents, and a couple of books that are meant to be more comprehensive guides.

Happy reading!