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Aggression, frustration and temper tantrums

Why does this happen?

- Not all children with autism have behavioural problems. Those that do are often reacting to a world that they find confusing and unpredictable.
- A child with autism may have a very low tolerance of frustration.
- He may not understand that other people are able to help him with a problem. He may struggle with a difficult task until he reaches the very limit of his tolerance level, never seeking help.
- The child may find the social environment at school confusing and unpredictable, leading to tension and stress.
- Aggression can be triggered by hypersensitivity to certain sensory stimuli. This might be something that adults do not even notice, such as a flickering light or chairs scraping the floor.
- Aggression may be used by the child to avoid something he doesn't want to do.
- Aggression might be used to gain attention, especially if the behaviour causes a great deal of fuss and excitement.
- Frustration can result from the lack of an appropriate skill. For example, the child may hit out at others when they touch or hug him; he doesn't realise he should say "Let go."
- The child may have difficulty anticipating future events. He may be fearful that if his needs are not immediately met, he won't ever get what he wants, so he finds it hard to share and take turns. This may cause him to lash out or have a tantrum.
- Short, intense outbursts of rage or aggression may be associated with epileptic seizures. Epilepsy is very common in children with autism. Onset of seizures can occur at any age.
- Angry outbursts may occur if the child is being bullied or teased. Children with autism lack appropriate coping mechanisms to deal with peer pressure, especially if they do not have close friends.

What you can do

- Remain calm. Remind yourself the behaviour is an attempt to communicate – it should not be interpreted as being naughty. Children with high functioning autism are rarely manipulative or scheming – and they are not trying to make your life difficult!
- A review of the child's stress level should always be undertaken when behavioural difficulties occur.
- Reinforce your expectations for behaviour. Give the child clear, predictable routines. State clearly to the child the consequences of aggressive behaviour *before* it occurs. For example,

“If you hit or kick anyone again today you will sit here for 5 minutes.”

- Note which activities the child finds difficult and simplify or modify them. Also consider that the behaviour may be due to boredom if the child finds a task too easy.
- Establish appropriate behaviours and teach them to the child. For example, teach appropriate social behaviours such as holding hands, touching or tapping someone on the shoulder rather than hitting. Include appropriate interactional behaviours such as sharing, waiting etc. Help him learn the necessary communication - for example, if he dislikes being touched and children always hug him and won't let go, teach him to say "Let go."
- Make a poster that clearly states acceptable classroom behaviour. Place it in the classroom where all children can see it. *All* students in the class should have an understanding of the consequences of breaking these rules.
- Provide examples of the appropriate way to act with a social story.
- Help the child to recognise and interpret feelings of unease so that he can learn to act on them before an 'explosion' occurs.
- Disruptive behaviour is likely to diminish as social and communication skills improve. Remember that when the child is stressed his ability to express himself verbally will be diminished.
- Reward and pay attention to the child when he is displaying *appropriate* behaviour. See [Effective rewards and motivators](#).
- Remember that the child may have outbursts of aggression just like a much younger child due to delayed emotional development. It can be hard for teachers to accept this type of behaviour, particularly if the child is talented in others areas of learning.
- Removing the child from the environment (time out) may work as a last resort. See [Behaviour modification – what works, what doesn't?](#)
- Talk to the child's parents. If this behaviour is out of character, he may need a medical checkup to rule out epileptic seizures.
- **Aggression towards others.** Immediately after the incident - remain calm and direct the child to a quiet space. If it is a minor incident, pay attention to the other child who is hurt and totally ignore the child who hit.
- Deal with the behaviour at a later date. It is important that both you and the child be calm when talking about the behaviour as there is more chance the child will process the information. When stressed or angry, the child's ability to understand language decreases.
- Often children on the spectrum find it difficult to talk about situations when they are 'personalised' and find it easier when the discussion is 'de-personalised'. This means that you talk about the situation in the third person. This can be done through the use of toys, drawings or role-plays.
- **Tantrums.** Remain calm and look at the tantrum as an act of communication. Try to establish why the behaviour is occurring. Try not to give any verbal or visual messages until the tantrum has stopped and then give full attention to the child. Praise the good behaviour. Use time out - see [Behaviour modification - what works, what doesn't?](#)
- **Resistant or oppositional behaviours - gaining compliance.** First, ask yourself if the child could be behaving this way out of anxiety, fear of failure, lack of comprehension, lack of interest or attention seeking. Treat the behaviour according to the cause.
- The child may try to distract you from the request by arguing. Try not to become involved in the argument. It wastes time and the child can become more confused due to the increase in

language.

- Check your requests. Are they statements and not questions? Don't give too many at once. Is the child too busy? Have you failed to gain his attention? See also [Communication > Not responding to instructions](#).
- In some cases the behaviour is due to a lack of understanding - the behaviour is produced to mask the inability to complete the task. Repeat the request in a simplified form and then ask the child what he has to do to check his understanding of the task.
- **Refusals.** If the child constantly refuses to perform a particular request give him the opportunity to do it for a very short period then heavily praise him. Over time, gradually increase the period he engages in the behaviour and decrease the amount of reinforcement.
- **Follow through.** If you have set up a particular consequence such as time out then you need to make sure you (and other staff) apply the consequence *each time* the behaviour is displayed. This can be tiring and time consuming so make sure you are prepared. If you have asked him to do something then you need to see that he follows it through and does it, even if you have to physically do it with him.
- **Keep your sense of humour.** This can be really difficult but it's important to keep your sense of humour and use it in appropriate situations. Not only will this help you see the funny side of situations, it will prevent *you* from becoming too stressed. Acting the fool can often be really effective as you are doing the exact opposite of what the child expects.