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Aggression, frustration and temper tantrums

Why does this happen?

- Not all students with ASD have behavioural problems. Those that do are often reacting to a world that they find confusing and unpredictable.
- The student 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 student may find the social environment of 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 the sound of the school bell.
- Aggression may be used by the student 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 student may hit out at others when he is touched or receives a pat on the back; he doesn't realise he should say "Let go."
- The student may have difficulty anticipating future events. He may be fearful that if his needs are not met immediately, he won't ever get what he wants. This can 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 ASD. Onset of seizures can occur at any age.
- Angry outbursts may occur if the student is being bullied or teased. He might lack appropriate coping mechanisms to deal with peer pressure, especially if he does not have close friends.
- A sudden increase in irritability or a lack of co-operation may be due to pain. Some people with ASD have a very high pain threshold and do not show that they are hurting in the usual way.

What you can do

- Remain calm, remind yourself the behaviour is an attempt to communicate – don't immediately assume that it is misbehaviour.
- A review of the student's stress level should always be undertaken when behavioural

difficulties occur.

- Reinforce your expectations for behaviour. Give the student clear, predictable routines. State clearly to the student 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 student finds difficult and simplify or modify them. On the other hand, the disruptive behaviour may be due to boredom if the student finds the task too easy.
- Make a list of rules for acceptable classroom behaviour and stick it into the student's diary.
- Help the student to recognise and interpret feelings of unease and act on them before an 'explosion' occurs. Use an 'emotional thermometer' and have the student visually identify where he is on the scale. Talk about different scenarios. For example, if the student loses his pen, he might put himself at 2/10 on the scale, if something really bad happened, it would rate a 10/10. This can increase the student's emotional understanding; ie. there is no need for a huge emotional reaction to a minor incident.
- Disruptive behaviour is likely to reduce as social and communication skills improve.
- Offer positive reinforcers for appropriate behaviour. [See *Effective rewards and motivators*](#).
- Remember that the student 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 student is talented in others areas of learning.
- Removing the student from the environment (ie. time out) may work as a last resort. See [Behaviour modification – what works, what doesn't?](#)
- Talk to the student's parents. If this behaviour is out of character, he may need a medical checkup to investigate whether the behaviour is caused by epileptic seizures.
- **Aggression towards others.** Immediately after the incident remain calm and direct the student to a quiet space. Pay attention to the 'victim' and totally ignore the child who hit.
- Deal with the behaviour at a later date. It is important that both you and the student are 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' so try talking about the situation in the third person.
- **Tantrums or 'meltdowns'**. 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, then give full attention to the child. Praise the good behaviour. Use time out if appropriate - see [Behaviour Modification - what works, what doesn't?](#)
- **Resistant or oppositional behaviours - gaining compliance.** Ask yourself if the student 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 student may try to distract you from the request by arguing. Try not to become involved in the argument. It wastes time and the student 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 he too busy? Have you failed to gain his attention? See also Communication > Not responding to instructions

- In some cases the behaviour may be 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 him what he has to do to check his understanding of the task.
- **Refusals.** If the student constantly refuses to perform a particular task 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 task 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 the child.
- **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 he expects.