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### **Managing unusual behaviour**

#### **Why does this happen?**

- Many inappropriate and difficult behaviours can be linked to high levels of anxiety, such as humming to mask out disturbing sounds, finger flicking or tapping a pencil to stay calm when feeling anxious. This behaviour is often the child's way of controlling an unpredictable world, hence reducing anxiety.
- Repetitive and self-stimulatory behaviour may be a kind of hobby for the child – he may enjoy the sensation. It may also help to keep the child feeling safe and calm. Sensory thresholds vary in children with autism; those with high thresholds will seek out stimulation.
- Self-injurious behaviour may be seen when the child is experiencing extreme anxiety or frustration.
- Self-injury may be an attempt to mask the physical pain of a medical condition. Self-injury has also been associated with epileptic seizures.
- Time out may be an effective means of controlling behaviour in children with autism. See [Behaviour modification](#) for more information.

#### **What you can do**

- Attempts to stop repetitive or self-stimulatory behaviour are unlikely to succeed. The behaviour serves a purpose so it is important to *replace* it with something more acceptable. Telling an anxious child to stop humming or tapping his foot is likely to cause him greater anxiety as he will have to try to control his compulsive behaviour as well as cope with his anxiety. Be alert to the physical signs that the child is becoming anxious and note these on the [Student Summary Form](#)
- Identify any sources of anxiety. Note when and where the behaviour occurs. If possible, make changes to the environment to reduce stress on the child.
- Help the child to develop greater self-awareness by interpreting emotions for him and encouraging him to communicate his feelings of distress.
- Lecturing will not alter the behaviour. Avoid using threats.
- Reward and pay attention to the student when he is working well and displaying good behaviour.
- Repetitive behaviour may be modified by allowing the child to perform this behaviour only at certain times or in a particular place. Another alternative is to restrict behaviour such as hand flapping to small 'flaps' inside the child's pocket or shirt. Allowing the child to carry a small favourite toy or object in his pocket could successfully modify this behaviour. It might be something related to his obsession, such as a small dinosaur or toy train, or a scrap of soft or fluffy material that the child likes to touch.
- Encourage vigorous physical activity to help burn up feelings of anxiety and stress.

- Give the child an alternate behaviour so that he knows what behaviour you are asking for. Instead of saying "Stop tapping your ruler" you might say "Keep your hands still." Some children with autism just don't know what they *should* do when told to stop an inappropriate behaviour.
- When trying to decrease an inappropriate behaviour things may get worse before they get better. If the behaviour does increase in frequency or intensity for a short period this is often a good sign that the method is working. Stay positive and look for small improvements