

## **www.autismhelp.info**

### **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 student – he may enjoy the sensation. It may also help to keep him feeling safe and calm. Sensory thresholds vary in children with autism; those with high thresholds will seek out stimulation.
- Time out may not be an effective means of controlling behaviour in children with autism. See [Behaviour Modification](#) for more information.
- Self-injurious behaviour may be seen when the student is experiencing extreme anxiety or frustration.
- Self-injury may be an attempt to mask the physical pain of a medical condition.
- Self-injury has been associated with epileptic seizures.
- Inappropriate behaviour, such as public masturbation or touching peers in a sexual way stems from the child's poor social awareness. The child can have great difficulty understanding why this behaviour is unacceptable.
- The onset of unusual and dangerous risk-taking behaviour may be a sign of depression or an anxiety disorder.

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

- Choose your battle. Work on the behaviour that is *most* unacceptable. The child may have other behaviours that are odd, but don't concern yourself too much with those that do not impact negatively on the child's learning or social functioning.
- Attempts to stop repetitive or self-stimulatory behaviour are unlikely to succeed. The behaviour serves a purpose (ie. to reduce anxiety) so it is important to *replace* it with something more acceptable. Telling an anxious student 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 student to develop greater self-awareness by interpreting emotions and encouraging him to communicate 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 can be modified by allowing the student 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. Allow the student to carry a favourite object in his pocket that he can touch frequently for reassurance - this might be something related to his obsession.
- Give the student 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 students 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.
- Where there is inappropriate touching, it can be helpful to discuss the child's difficulties with others in the class. Always ask permission from the parents and child first. Disclosure is a sensitive issue and requires a planning and discussion at a PSG meeting. When disclosure is handled sensitively, other students in the class can work as a team to help the child with autism develop greater understanding of social rules and appropriate behaviour.
- Talk to the student's parents regarding a psychological assessment if you suspect the child has mental health issues.