

Top tips for working with a preschool child who has ASD

Behaviour

- Challenging behaviour is often an attempt at communication – it's not being naughty. Try to identify the trigger for the behaviour. Identify sources of anxiety.
- The child may have outbursts of aggression just like a much younger child due to delayed emotional development.
- Be consistent in everything you do. Discuss behavioural issues with others and make sure everyone agrees on the approach to be used.
- Always give advance warning of changes in routine.
- Tell the child what you expect him to do rather than telling him what you don't want.
- Remember that common techniques for calming an anxious child, like cuddling or sitting the child on your knee, may have the opposite effect on a child with ASD.
- Don't try to stop odd or repetitive behaviour unless it interferes with learning or threatens the wellbeing of other children. It is better to modify the behaviour.
- Encourage the child to ask for help before reaching the point of frustration.
- Work with the child's interests and obsessions to increase motivation and to learn new skills.

Communication

- Simplify your language. Be very specific. Remember language is likely to be interpreted literally.
- Avoid sarcasm and irony. Metaphors may be confusing.
- Before you speak, use the child's name to gain his attention, even when addressing the group.
- Give one instruction at a time. Allow the child sufficient time to interpret then respond to an instruction. This may take longer in children with ASD.
- Encourage eye contact, but don't insist if this causes anxiety.
- Be aware that facial expressions and gestures may be misinterpreted.
- Visual cues should be used to support verbal communication.
- Be sensitive to the child's efforts to communicate.

Sensory

- Children with ASD can be distracted by background noise that other people 'filter out'. Even minor background noise may disturb some children.
- The child may feel sensory overload from visual stimuli, the close proximity of others or from physical contact.

Social interaction

- Social skills are not acquired naturally – they need to be specifically taught.
- Help the child to become aware that other people have thoughts and feelings that may be different to their own.
- The child may not focus on what you consider to be obvious – be explicit.
- Some children will need time out or quiet time from the demands of social interaction.
- Understand the child's difficulty interpreting social situations. Model and prompt appropriate social behaviour.

General tips

- Children with autism thrive on routine. Sessions should have a well-defined, predictable structure.
- Although routine is important, allow for some flexibility so that the child learns to cope with minor changes in a supportive environment.
- Rather than tell the child to 'find something to do', *show* them what they can do and provide examples of creative work.
- To encourage generalisation of skills, teach the same task in a variety of situations.
- Be persistent. Progress may be slow and results may be difficult to see at first.
- Be calm, positive and consistent.
- Every child with ASD has individual abilities and needs – what works for one child may not work for another.
- Every child can have a bad day. Don't feel at fault if things are not going well.