



Parent Notes

Module 2

Autism: Systematic use of daily interactions

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In brief

Every interaction that parents have with their children is a teaching opportunity. This module helps parents use the daily interactions they have with their children in the most effective way.

Overview



See Module 2 page 1

Children with autism have a different learning style. Often they need to learn in a structured way (situation by situation) many of the skills that other people pick up incidentally. Even when we teach a child with autism what to do in one situation, they often have trouble using that information in other similar situations or places. We refer to this as a difficulty with generalising behaviour.

Identifying the skill strengths of your child

Communication skills

It is useful to remember that communication difficulty is one of the core features of autism. Individuals with autism have a different communication style. It may be helpful to reread the earlier sections on 'Talking and communication' and 'Behaviour' (Introduction, page 8 -11).



See Module 2 page 3

Because people with autism have a fear of failure and want to be 'Mr or Ms Perfect' they often experience high levels of anxiety and confusion when confronted with learning a new skill. Therefore it is important to build on existing strengths and provide positive feedback to let them know they are on the right track.



See Module 2 page 4

Children with autism not only require the opportunity to practise on a regular basis, they also need the opportunity to practise in different settings. An example of this would be brushing their teeth at home as well as at Grandma's.

When making activities and materials more user-friendly for your child, remember that the child with autism is a visual learner. (For example, make a line with a marker pen on a drinking glass for them to pour their drink up to).

Understanding triggers and consequences

Triggers



See Module 2 page 5

Sometimes it can be difficult to work out the trigger for a child's behaviour. The trigger could be as intangible as a memory of something that happened in the past. For example, a child may have had a bad experience once while walking past a shop, and every time he walks past the same shop he screams because he remembers the bad experience.

Consequences

Children with autism can be highly motivated by negative reactions as well as positive. They may like the look on your face when you become angry. They may like the tone of your voice when you raise it. They may enjoy being excluded from company. For these reasons you need to think very carefully about what would be a negative consequence for your child.

Using triggers and consequences to build on your child's strengths.



See Module 2 page 10

Building on your child's strengths



See Module 2 page 5

Avoiding verbal overload

Children with autism experience difficulty in using and understanding language and this can affect their behaviour in a number of ways. Because they are visual learners and verbal information takes longer to process, it is important to remember to keep language brief and concise when communicating with your child. An example of modifying labelled praise for your child, when they are waiting for their turn on a swing, would be you tell them in a calm, gentle and quiet tone 'good waiting Johnny'.

Another positive consequence that parents can use for their child with autism is access to sensory reinforcers. Sensory reinforcers are sensations involving sight, sound, smell or touch that the child enjoys. For example: rubbing the face, vibratory stimulation, a spinning top, music, squeeze ball.

Repetitive behaviours

Many individuals with autism engage in behaviours which can be annoying and socially inappropriate but can serve as a stress reliever for the child. These are often the behaviours parents want to change or eliminate. However, if you eliminate or suppress one of these behaviours, your child will replace it with something else which may be worse than the original behaviour.

Repetitive behaviours can be used as a reinforcer to encourage some other behaviours. (For example, allowing your child to repetitively flap his piece of string for two minutes only after he has completed a certain activity.)

Weakening undesirable behaviour



See Module 2 page 11-12

Many children with autism have rigid and inflexible patterns of behaviour and they find change difficult. When change occurs these children can become stressed and anxious and this means that it may be a slow process before positive behaviour occurs. If you give up too soon, thinking that the strategies are not working, you will be left with a higher level of difficult behaviour than when you commenced. To avoid the possibility of this it is important that you are able to continue implementing the process once you commence it. You may want to consider ways of helping you through this process such as relaxation techniques, respite, meditation, relaxing baths, massages. Now is the time to read the *Dealing with stress in the family* and *Your family as a team* booklets.

Planning effective instructions



See Module 2 pages 13–16

Language

Remember to keep your language as clear, concise and concrete as possible as the child with autism understands everything literally. An example of literal use of language would be if your child asked you to do something for them and you said 'hang on'. They would look for something to hang on to rather than understanding that you meant just to wait for a moment. You also need to be sure that the child knows what you are saying to them. What does 'Tidy your room' mean? Is the label meaningful? What does tidy mean?

You also need to avoid idioms, double meanings and sarcasm as they will not be understood by your child.

Visuals

The use of visuals increases your child's understanding of your verbal instruction. This can lead to more success and help increase positive behaviour. Anything in written/visual form is extremely helpful, such as timetables, work sequences, rules, changes to routine or new situations and instructions. Limit choice as too much causes confusion.

- A picture cue can help your child remember what they are to do next.
- Counting down time schedules can assist your child with waiting.
- Finish box to teach your child to understand that the concept 'finished' means 'no more'. A red cross indicates to your child that things are not going to happen as planned, things are not a choice, or that a particular behaviour is not acceptable.
- Schedules can help your child to know what is happening in the day and reduces anxiety and confusion.

Consider the use of a schedule for regular routines such as cleaning up their room; getting ready in the morning, getting ready for bed, etc. See the example of the room cleaning routine schedule.

Giving effective instructions



See Module 2 page 13

Guidelines for giving effective instructions

1. **How you use your body:** Using eye contact can be uncomfortable for individuals with autism, and they may find looking and listening at the same time hard to do. A fleeting look may be sufficient, they do not need to maintain eye contact, you just need to know you have their attention and they are listening.
2. **Wait for a response:** A child with autism has a slower processing time, therefore you may need to wait anything from a couple of seconds up to a minute for your child to respond to your request.
3. **Give positive consequences for compliance.** There may be times when you need to give the positive consequence within a split second. This will help your child make the connection between his behaviour and the positive consequence. As your child learns the connection you can gradually extend the length of time before you give the positive consequence.

Instructions to 'stop' doing something

Once again, reduce the amount of verbal instructions and redirect to a positive activity. Rather than saying 'Stop running in the supermarket Daniel, you need to walk', You would simply say 'Daniel, you need to walk'.

Also consider the use of a red cross to tell your child that a particular behaviour is not acceptable, such as not touching light switches (see example).

Setting up household rules



See Module 2 pages 17–19

These help the child with autism understand expectations and understand what they need to do.

Advantages of household rules

Household rules reduce anxiety and confusion, create a safer environment and build self esteem. They provide a natural opportunity for positive reinforcement when the child is following them. (For example, 'I like the way you wash your hands after going to the toilet'.)

Getting the rules to trigger good behaviour

You can display the rules where they occur using systems such as Compic or Boardmaker, pictures or words (e.g. 'flush toilet beside the toilet, 'wash hands' by the sink and 'hang up towel' beside the towel rail in the bathroom). Children learn better in the environment where it happens and have difficulty generalising to another setting, so you may need to re-teach the same skill in different environments.