

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders display challenging behaviour for a number of reasons:

- Communication – to try to tell you what they want.
- Frustration due to impaired language skills
- To avoid / escape from demands or situations
- For attention - (getting angry, or yelling at a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may actually be reinforcing for him/her)
- As an inappropriate means of initiating social interaction with other children
- To express themselves when they are angry or upset
- They may not know it is unacceptable behaviour

Steps to deal with challenging behaviours

- Check whether there is a medical reason.
- Look at the situation in which behaviour occurs. It may be enough to restructure the environment or situation. Is the situation too stressful for the child? It may be necessary to work with the child in a smaller or quieter group and gradually work up to a larger group. Are your requests appropriate? The child may cope with a shorter time on the mat, or a less demanding task. Is there something in the environment that is distressing the child? Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders may become upset in some situations, such as in a room with a hand dryer or other noise, around animals, or in a room which has been rearranged.
- Observe and record the behaviour, when does it happen, what has happened before, what happens after, does it happen with a variety of people and in different settings.
- Draw as little attention to the incident as possible initially. Move the child away, give no eye contact. This type of response may “nip it in the bud”
- If the behaviour continues, more intervention needs to take place. As soon as challenging behaviour occurs, move the child away from the situation. Do this calmly and confidently, giving no extra attention or eye contact and just say “No hitting / pushing”. Tell the child what to do e.g. “Hands down” so that the child understands what is expected. If the child uses a visual communication system (such as Compic), show the child the appropriate Compic.
- Direct the child to another activity and positively reward him or her for behaving appropriately.
- It is important that the child doesn't learn to use challenging behaviour to get out of doing certain activities. When the child is calm, return to the previous task and encourage him to complete the last stage e.g. put away one toy, put in the last piece of a puzzle.
- If the inappropriate behaviour is an attempt to interact, teach the child more appropriate ways to approach others, e.g. touch them lightly on the arm / shoulder; say “hello”.
- Ensure that everyone involved with the child deals with the behaviour in the same manner. Through consistency the child will learn that this behaviour is not acceptable to anyone, or in any situation.
- Sometimes other children in the group may need to learn how to deal with challenging behaviour as it is starting. Teach them to say and sign “STOP” forcefully to the child. They could be taught to add “ NO HITTING”, “HANDS DOWN” or whatever is appropriate.
- Give lots of reinforcement for appropriate behaviour particularly in those situations where the challenging behaviour has occurred in the past. Aim to increase the child's range of desired behaviours and to improve his/her understanding of what is wanted.