


Strategies for supporting communication, sensory needs, emotions and behaviour

Information for parents and carers





Some children and young people experience differences in the way they understand and experience the world. For example, they may communicate differently, experience sensory sensitivities, think in a different way and/or struggle to understand and manage their emotions.

These pages provide some ideas for strategies which may help support a child at both home and school.

It's important to remember that every child's needs are different, and it may be trial and error to find the strategies which work for your child. Strategies may need to be put in place consistently across different settings (such as at home and school) for a period of time before any difference is seen.

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Communication

Some children experience differences in the way they communicate and relate to others. For example, they may struggle to understand abstract language, they may interpret things very literally and they may struggle to understand other people. This can make life confusing for them. Try the following.

- Use clear and direct language. For example, instead of saying 'the table needs to be set', say 'please set the table'.
- Use their name before giving information so they know you are talking to them.
- Avoid using metaphorical, non-literal or abstract language to make sure there are no misunderstandings. If you do use these, explain clearly what you have said and what you mean.
- [Use visual supports](#) to help your child understand. For example, use symbols to show if they liked or didn't like something, visual timetables, communication cards, or written instructions with pictures.
- [Social stories™](#) can help prepare your child for what to expect or to help them understand certain concepts. Social stories™ were created by Carol Gray in 1991 and are descriptions of situations, events or activities which provide information about what to expect.
- For older children, [comic strip conversations](#) can help them to understand social interactions, people's intentions and feelings.
- Relate examples to their interests such as their favourite TV show.
- Provide other ways for your child to communicate their needs or how they are feeling, like writing, drawing, gestures or mood bands.
- Use [communication cards or mood cards](#) for your child to communicate their needs or feelings when they struggle to verbalise them.
- Break information down and speak slowly to avoid information overload. Repeat key words and allow give them extra time to process what you are saying.
- Consider the sensory environment; louder or more busy environments may affect your child being able to process information.
- Avoid open-ended questions like 'how was your day'. Instead ask specific questions like 'did you like your geography lesson today?'
- Interacting with others, initiating conversations at appropriate times, understanding and relating to other people and taking part in every day family, school and social life can be difficult for autistic people.

You can read [more about social communication on our website](#).

Coping with change

Change can be difficult for some children to cope with. They may become overwhelmed at sudden changes or feel anxious when their routine is disrupted.

Here are some strategies that may help.

- Visual timetables can help the child understand what will happen at each stage of their day. Set well-defined schedules of activities and help them to estimate how long each task will take.
- Prepare for transitions. For example, use visual clocks, egg timers or stop watches to enable them to visualise how long they have left of each activity. Give transition warnings ahead of time.
- Maintain structure and routine as much as possible. For example, keep the order of tasks during a morning routine the same. Predictability can make them feel less anxious and help them to cope better during the day.
- Prepare them for new places or activities. For example, visit a venue ahead of time, watch a video about what to expect, use [social stories™](#), and add changes to the daily planner/visual timetable.
- Give advance notice of changes where possible.
- Offer choices to give them a sense of control. For example, 'would you like to wear a jumper or a coat to go to the shop?'
- Use [choice boards](#) to help your child understand and process the options available and indicate their preference. This may include a selection of pictures showing what activities they could choose to do.
- Provide a sense of familiarity during unstructured times or times of change. For example, encourage them to have a transition object they can focus on (eg a cuddly toy or a fidget toy), listen to familiar music that they like, talk about something they love, or provide a quiet place for them to go to.
- Try to limit the amount of change at any one time.
- Encourage your child to recognise their feelings around change and identify specific triggers or anxieties.

Sensory needs

There are eight sensory systems – touch, smell, taste, sight, sound, interoception (internal bodily sensations), vestibular (balance/movement) and proprioception (body awareness/coordination).

Every individual's sensory profile is different. Some children experience the sensory world in different ways to others. They may be over-sensitive or under sensitive to sensory input – but even if they are more sensitive to one sensory system like sound, they may be less sensitive to another like smell.

Auditory / noise

- Ear defenders or noise-cancelling headphones can help children sensitive to noise.
- Prepare them for changes in noise levels, for example using a [social story™](#) to explain a fire drill.
- Give them access to a quiet, low stimulation environment for them to go to when they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Calming music to filter distractions may improve focus and reduce distress.
- For children under-sensitive to auditory input, they may benefit from subtitles on videos/TV, written instructions or visual supports.

Tactile / touch

- Adjust school uniform where you can such as black trainers instead of school shoes or leggings instead of tights.
- Remind them to remove or put on their jumper as they may not notice temperature changes.
- Seam free and sensory friendly clothing may reduce distress around clothing.
- Remove clothing tags.
- Encourage your child to express their needs, for example 'please don't hug me, I don't like to be touched'.
- Food textures may be difficult for some children to tolerate. It's ok for them to have their food preferences if their diet still meets their nutritional needs. They may naturally choose to expand their diet when they are ready. If you are concerned about their nutritional intake, seek advice from their GP.
- Trial different types of creams and sun lotions.
- Weighted blankets or soft things can help to self-soothe.
- Offer opportunities for sensory or messy play such as leaf piles, water tables, sensory bins, painting with hands etc.

Visual / sight

- Remove visual clutter in the environment to reduce distractions and overwhelm.
- Avoid visually overwhelming décor or posters.
- Dim lights and non-fluorescent lighting. Use natural light where possible.
- Offer sunglasses for outdoors.
- Use visual supports.
- Encourage visual stimulation such as lava lamps or sensory lighting.

Gustatory / taste

- For children who are sensitive to taste and food textures, aim to keep mealtimes calm.
- Create a list of safe foods.
- Try different toothpaste brands, or non-flavoured toothpaste.
- Keep mealtimes as calm as possible. Introduce new foods outside of mealtimes to help them feel more relaxed.
- Offer crunchy or chewy snacks for children who enjoy different textures.
- Chewies (stim toys) may help some children to regulate.

Olfactory / smell

- Avoid wearing perfumes and colognes around a child who is very sensitive to smells. Strong smells may cause headaches or affect their ability to focus.
- Use chemical and fragrance free washing products.
- Use plain soaps and non-scented shampoos.
- Open windows for fresh air.

Interoception (internal bodily feelings)

- Support your child to notice how different parts of their body feel.
- Practice naming internal sensations throughout the day.
- Use an [emotions wheel](#) if they are struggling to identify their feelings.
- Verbalise your own body feelings to your child, for example 'I feel nervous about seeing my boss today and my stomach feels uneasy' or 'I've just walked quickly up the road and now my heart is beating quickly'.
- Include eating and drinking and toilet breaks into the daily routine as your child may not realise they are hungry or need to use the bathroom. Encourage older children to set alarms as reminders.

Vestibular (balance and movement)

- Provide regular access to activities like trampolining, swinging, dancing and gymnastics to help your child to [regulate and meet their movement and balance seeking needs](#) in a safe way.
- Use fidget toys to aid focus, learning and self-
- Have equipment at home to facilitate stimulation where possible like a trampoline, sensory swing, bouncy ball or rocking chair.
- If your child is over sensitive to balance and movement, try new activities slowly and avoid activities that might make them feel dizzy. They are more likely to experience car sickness so may benefit from sitting at the front of the car when possible.

Proprioceptive (body awareness and coordination)

- Access to things like a weighted blanket, compression clothing, and exercise like swimming, dance, yoga, lifting/pulling objects or push-ups can help to make them feel more calm. [Read more about proprioceptive input here.](#)
- Encourage activities at home that meet sensory seeking needs safely, like climbing frames, jumping and bringing in bags of shopping.
- In school, they may be able to help to move tables or chairs.
- For children who are over sensitive to their body's movement, prepare them for what to expect. Respect their body boundaries if they do not want to be touched and encourage them to express these needs to others.

Sensory processing workshops

Our Occupational Therapy team run [free online sensory processing workshops](#), find out more about these and about [sensory processing](#) on our website. You can also find information on [eating and healthy lifestyle](#) and from the [National Autistic Society](#).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is how we think and feel about ourselves. Children who struggle with communication, friendships and their emotions are more likely to experience low self-esteem. This may be because they hear more negative messages about themselves or feel there is something wrong with them.

Following this advice can help boost their self-esteem.

- Tell your child regularly that you love them and why they are special.
- Carefully challenge the negative things that they say about themselves.
- Provide regular 1:1 or 'special time' for you both to spend quality time together.
- Remind them that you believe in them.
- Show interest in the things they enjoy and want to talk to you about.
- Encourage them to identify what helps when they feel bad about themselves.

[Get more advice on the Young Minds website.](#)

Managing emotions

Children can't regulate themselves in the same way as adults – they're still learning how to manage their emotions. Some children find it particularly hard to identify and understand their emotions.

When difficulties arise, try to discuss these openly and carefully with your child. Offer them choices and flexibility where possible. They may benefit from clear descriptions of emotions, consistent boundaries and consequences, and expected/consistent reactions.

Try and adapt the language you use when they're stressed. Say their name first. Use 'I' language, for example "I can see that you are upset". Allow them time to process what you say. Repeat the sentence with the same words if necessary. Break down instructions into simple steps.

Acknowledge their feelings

- Acknowledge and validate their feelings of anger/frustration rather than dismissing their emotions. This will help them to feel understood. (eg 'I can see that you are upset, I wonder if this is because you feel hurt by...').
- Help your child to appropriately express their feelings (eg 'Why don't you show me how you're feeling by...'), by encouraging them to:
 - Use their words
 - Draw a picture
 - Go to an identified calm place
 - Walk away
 - Count to 20
 - Focus on breathing in and out
 - Tense and relax their muscles
 - Exercise (eg run/jump)
 - Hit a cushion
 - Rip up scrap paper
 - Splash cold water on their face
- Develop [communication flashcards](#) together that your child can write or draw on to communicate how they are feeling if they aren't able to say it. Have some prepared in advance that they can choose and some that they can write on.
- Use an [emotions wheel](#) if they are struggling to identify their feelings.
- Look at the [Zones of Regulation resources](#) where there are lots of helpful ideas.

- Create a [calm/self-soothe toolbox](#) with items in that will help them to calm down or cope when they are struggling. You could include headphones so they can listen to music, paper and pens so they can draw/write, fidget or sensory toys, paper to rip, communication cards, a soft toy and activities such as bubbles, paints or wordsearches.
- Set a time each day for 1:1 time where you and your child can spend 15 minutes talking about their day and their emotions. If they struggle with anxiety, this could be called 'worry time' to allow them a set space to talk about their worries.

Create a safe space and build time for relaxation and physical activity

- Talk to the school about your child having a safe space to go to when they are beginning to feel frustrated or anxious.
- Identify a safe space at home (for example their bedroom or a playroom) where they know they can go to for space when they need to.
- Build time for relaxation and physical activity into their daily routine.
- Relaxing activities could include watching a movie under a weighted blanket, using a sensory light projector, jumping on a trampoline, listening to music, time in a sensory swing, looking after a pet or reading/writing/doing art.
- Redirect challenging behaviour into an activity that releases energy/emotions, for example trampolining, running around the garden, or listening to music.
- Give your child space to calm down and recover. They may respond to intense emotions or exhaustion by shutting down or experiencing meltdowns. It might be better to talk later, after they've had time to recover.

Anxiety

Anxiety is common in people with autism. And anxiety is an increasingly common problem among children and young people, with approximately 1 in 10 people experiencing it at some point in their lives. The following resources may help.

[Find out how to help with anxiety](#)

[Autism West Midlands](#)

Managing behaviour

Do try to understand your child's behaviour. Behaviour is a form of communication. There might be underlying causes for their behaviour. For example, the sensory environment may increase distress and result in challenging behaviour for a child who is sensitive to noise. A child experiencing hidden anxiety may appear to be defiant.

Confrontation is rarely helpful. If it seems like your child is deliberately choosing not to comply, think about the reasons why¹. If they are struggling to overcome the situation, a calm approach that offers choices, alternatives and flexibility may be more helpful.

Establish and maintain clear and consistent boundaries for your child. Be clear about what behaviour is acceptable and what is not and help them to understand why.

Rules

- Set clear ground rules for behaviour. It may be helpful to describe these rules as being for everyone including yourself, not only your child.
- Keep the rules to as few as possible (eg four or five) so they are more likely to remember and stick to them.
- Agree rewards and consequences for sticking to or not sticking to the rules.
- Involve your child and the whole family in creating the rules so that everyone understands and can be involved.
- Write down the rules and stick them somewhere visible.

Rewards and praise

- The emphasis should be on positive reinforcement of desired behaviours and effort rather than sanctions. Notice when your child achieves the desired outcomes and what they did.
- Praise your child frequently and offer rewards to encourage desired behaviour and to make sure your child knows what you want them to do.
- Pay attention to positive behaviours and praise these so that they are more encouraged to do them more frequently. For example, if you are working on your child using unkind language, it would be important to praise and reward them when they use kind language to reinforce this.
- If your child wants something and can't have it, and they tolerate this without arguing, praise or reward them for this.
- Be specific with praise, for example 'the compliment you gave your brother was really kind, well done'.
- Use hugs, kisses, hi-5s (or whatever your child prefers) at the same times as verbal praise.
- Reward them with things like their favourite activities, toys, tokens or small amounts of their favourite food or drink.

- Try a token system/reward chart. This involves setting up a chart of positive behaviour somewhere visible. Your child can gain points for positive behaviour, then receive a prize after getting a certain number of points. Make sure they understand what they need to do and encourage them to be involved in setting up the system. Never take away points they've already earned.
- Praise should be immediate so that positive behaviour is reinforced.
- Show enthusiasm when offering praise, for example be energetic, smile, hug and speak enthusiastically to show how pleased you are.
- Give your child 'special' tasks around the house which are theirs and nobody else's. For example, watering a plant that is only theirs, feeding the pet every morning. This will give them a sense of pride and ownership and help to build their self-esteem. Write out their responsibilities clearly and offer reminders when you need to.

Diversion

- Aim to recognise early warning signs and divert behaviour before it occurs by distracting your child with another activity.
- Have a secret supply of games/activities/treats you can use to divert them.
- The diversion needs to happen before any challenging behaviour occurs, otherwise you may accidentally reinforce the behaviour. For example, if they shout and then you give them a fun game or chocolate bar, they will learn they get this when they shout.
- Help them to calm down when they are becoming frustrated. Identify calming activities (for example the calm toolbox) to use.
- If your child is injuring themselves or others, consider placing a barrier such as a pillow or cushion between them and whatever they are harming or using to harm themselves.

[Families Under Pressure](#) provide evidence-based tips and advice to deal with challenging behaviour from researchers and NHS mental health experts.

Children and young people with conditions such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and sensory processing difficulties might also display aggressive behaviour when they feel out of control, over stimulated or anxious, or when they're finding the sensory environment difficult. [Find out how to help with anger and aggressive behaviour.](#)

Coping with demands

For some children, ordinary demands (like getting ready, going out for the day, and even activities they enjoy) can cause anxiety. This can result in what appears to be defiance, avoidance and challenging behaviour, but stems from the child feeling out of control. It is important to consider that children usually have a lot less control over their lives than we do as adults.

The following strategies may help:

- Consider the reasons for your child's behaviour. For example, they may have difficulty processing language and expectations, feel confused around social interactions, struggle to understand their emotions or feel anxious at uncertainty and not feeling in control.
- Pick your battles and adjust your own expectations of your child.
- Offer flexibility and choices, for example 'would you prefer to have a bath or a shower' or 'would you prefer to read before dinner or after dinner'.
- Allow more time for getting ready in the morning and leaving the house.
- Rephrase demands, for example, 'your clothes are on your bed, let me know if you need help getting dressed' rather than 'you need to get ready now', or using phrases such as 'I wonder if...' or 'can we see if...'
- Use humour or novelty or a sense of competition to encourage your child to complete a task.
- Make demands indirect, for example asking them if they can help you with something.
- Role play may help your child to understand other people's perspectives.
- Work collaboratively with your child to find solutions.

You might find this information on [Pathological Demand Avoidance](#) helpful.

Sleep

Good quality sleep is important for children's growth and development. Some children find it hard to fall asleep or stay asleep at night. Encouraging good sleep hygiene and establishing a good sleep routine is important.

- Avoid naps during the day as this may make them feel less sleepy at nighttime.
- Children with higher levels of energy may need to do more physical activity during the day so that they feel tired at bedtime, for example playing sports, trampolining or going on walks or to the park.
- Avoid caffeine for at least six hours before bedtime. This includes tea, coffee and fizzy drinks.

Creating a good sleep environment

- Make the sleep environment the best it can be for your child. Consider all the things around them that may affect their sleep.
- Minimise noise levels. Some children though may need some sound to settle, for example relaxing background music, white noise, the sound of a fan or listening to an audiobook.
- Make sure the room is a comfortable temperature and the bed is comfortable.
- Weighted blankets may help some children to sleep.
- Use a night light if your child is afraid of the dark.

Create a sleep routine

- Introduce a consistent bedtime routine which is the same every day. This should help your child to wind down and relax before bed.
- A bedtime routine may involve finishing an activity by a certain time and doing a less stimulating activity, such as reading a book or being read to, having a bath, making up a story together, drawing or colouring or listening to music or an audiobook. Offer them choices of what they would like their bedtime routine to include.
- Screens (phones, TVs, computers, games consoles, tablets) should be switched off at least an hour before bed. The light from electronic devices is thought to block the release of melatonin (a hormone which helps us to sleep).
- The routine may also include packing their school bag for the next day, brushing their teeth, tidying their room, or having 1:1 time.
- Establish a set time they should be in their room and a set time they should be in bed. Going to bed at the same time every night (including on weekends and holidays) helps the body to develop and sustain a good sleep cycle.
- Write out the bedtime routine and put it in your child's bedroom so they can remember the steps of the routine and what time it starts.

During the bedtime routine

- Set clear rules about getting out of bed and playing, and what they can and can't do. Add these rules to the bedtime routine sheet.
- When your child is not sticking to the routine, remind them to go back to bed. Reinforce the routine by pointing to the bedtime routine sheet/checklist. Reset their bedtime music or audiobook to encourage them to settle.
- Try not to argue or shout as the aim is to keep them calm and settled.
- Remove items such as technology or games from their room at night that they may be tempted to play with.
- Make sure they have had a drink, been to the toilet and prepared for the next day before they go to bed to minimise reasons for getting out of bed.
- Use a star chart to mark when they have stuck to the bedtime routine.
- Talk with your child about how they feel the routine is working. Help them to recognise the positive effects of a good bedtime routine.

Keeping a sleep diary

- If sleep continues to be difficult, keep a sleep diary and record activities leading up to bedtime, all food and drink consumed before bed, time in bedroom, time in bed, time asleep, hours slept, sleep disturbances, time they wake up.
- Note what strategies appear to help and what don't.
- Take this sleep diary with you if you do seek advice from a medical professional.

The Sleep Charity provides advice and support around sleep. They also have a [Teen Sleep Hub](#).

[Read our blog on dealing with troubled sleep](#) and our [blog on teenagers and sleep](#).

Adjustments to the school environment

Alongside the above, children with sensory processing, communication needs and differences in thinking will require adaptations to the school environment. This can include the following.

- Access to a quiet area or 'time out' card to leave the classroom when needed.
- Noise cancelling earphones or ear defenders.
- Adapted uniform to account for their sensory sensitivities.
- Flexibility in seating plans, for example child may wish to be seated near the door or the teacher, or away from distractions.
- Being given notice of any changes in advance where possible.
- Giving them a visual timetable so they understand the plan for the day.
- Give them visual clocks, egg timers or stop watches so they can see how long they have left of each activity and prepare them for the transition.
- Regular 1:1 time with a keyworker or mentor, or when they appear frustrated or struggling.
- Use of fidget toys.
- Breaking down tasks, giving instructions one at a time, writing instructions down.
- Be flexible with group work – talk to the child about what might help them.
- Give them a safe place to go to at breaktime.
- Remind them to drink water throughout the day.
- Let them have extra time to process instructions and information.
- Provide adjustments to homework where needed – they may struggle with homework as they may see school as school and home as home, and feel exhausted after school.

- Support in understanding peer relationships and expectations, as well as helping peers to understand them.
- Provide consistency between home and school, with regular communication to make sure parents and the school are on the same page, as well as putting in place a system for reviewing progress. Examples include communication books between home and school, Individual Education Plans and weekly communication sheets.
- The emphasis should be on positive reinforcement of desired behaviours and effort rather than sanctions. Notice when the child achieves the desired outcomes and what has made this successful.
- Involve the child in selecting their targets and rewards, as this will make them feel more motivated and make sure they understand what they are working towards.

Further information

You may find the following services helpful for further support and advice.

- **Much of the same support available after an ADHD diagnosis is also available when a child or young person is waiting for an assessment.**
[Find out about all the support available now.](#)
- **Parenting Special Children** – supporting families, children and young people with either diagnosed or suspected ADHD or autism.
www.parentingspecialchildren.co.uk
- **Place2Be Parenting Smart** – offering practical advice for parents and carers of children aged 4-11 from Place2Be, the children’s mental health charity.
www.parentingsmart.place2be.org.uk
- **Families Under Pressure** – tips and advice by researchers and NHS mental health experts on dealing with challenging behaviour.
<https://maudsleycharity.org/familiesunderpressure/>
- **Witherslack Group** – providing support, advice and resources for parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs.
www.witherslackgroup.co.uk/advice-and-support/
- **IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Educational Advice)** – leading charity providing free and independent advice and support to families of children and young people with SEND.
www.ipsea.org.uk
- **Young Minds** – the UK’s leading charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people.
www.youngminds.org.uk/