



Early Years Autism Support

Support with Emotional Regulation

Key Points

- Children with autism experience the world differently to others they can find it difficult to adapt and control their emotional responses.
- They experience differences in the interpretation of their emotions and those of others.
- They can find it hard to understand how others are feeling and how to react.
- Strong emotional responses can be experienced for prolonged periods of time.

Emotional Regulation Challenges

Children on the autism spectrum may:

- Seem to over or under react to situations.
- Experience negative emotions for a long periods of time
- Be unable to express, recognise or label how they are feeling, and why they are feeling that way
- Struggle to communicate feelings verbally and use behaviour instead
- Find it difficult to know how to solve a problem
- Have particular difficulty coping with the unknown or unexpected.
- Experience additional stressors in response to : changes, demands, sensory overload and understanding of language and social situations

Strategies for developing emotional regulation

Be patient, realistic, and consistent

Be prepared that it will take time to change behaviour. It can be useful to track behaviour on charts or in a diary to monitor progress over time. Set achievable goals, focussing on one or two behaviours and using one or two strategies.

Introducing too many changes may have a negative impact.

Try strategies over at least a two-week period to gauge their impact. If you find something that works well, ensure that key people are aware so the strategy can be applied across settings.

Consider the sensory environment

It is important to tune into the environment to support your understanding of your child's behaviour, as even subtle changes in the sensory environment may have an impact. Reduce sensory challenges in the environment where possible, e.g. lighting, noise, smells etc.

Support effective communication

Consider adjusting your communication when your child is distressed, using fewer words/questions or writing/using visual information – this will avoid adding to any overload. Support your child to express their needs, discomfort using scales, pictures, charts and other visual support tools.



Help to identify emotions

Teach your child to identify their feelings by naming them when they are happening e.g. 'I can see that you are feeling cross that they did not share their toys with you' and use faces and pictures to support understanding.

Use visual support tools to turn emotions into 'concrete' concepts e.g. with a traffic light system.

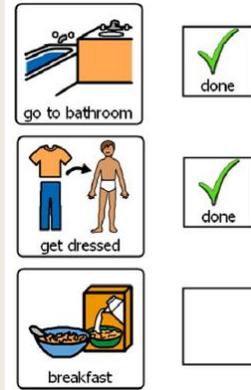
Being able to label emotions is the first step to enable strategy development e.g. when I'm feeling angry, I need to...

Praise and reward

Use rewards and motivators to encourage target behaviours or the use of a coping strategy. Try to give these immediately and in a way which is meaningful, this might be verbal praise, stickers, time on an activity or working toward a larger reward.

Manage change and transition times.

Use visual supports, count down slowly from 10 to 1 or explain what will happen in advance to help prepare for changes, unstructured times and transitions. Children with autism can find it difficult to conceptualise time and may benefit from a visual sequence of events e.g. now and next, or a timetable.



Offer a safe space.

Provide a safe space, which is calm, quiet and familiar e.g. a large box or pop up tent with a beanbag chair inside. This teaches a coping strategy and is particularly helpful if your child is struggling with the sensory environment.

Build in relaxation

Build in opportunities to relax or engage in favourite activities into a daily routine. Understanding your child's sensory profile will help develop ideas for relaxing activities. Some examples include swinging on a swing, 'deep pressure' activities such as pushing a vacuum or wheelbarrow, tight squeezes or sucking a drink through a straw.

Generalise and maintain skills.



Ensure that key people and settings are aware of strategies which help e.g. if a quiet space and swinging work at home, having an equivalent in school or nursery will be beneficial. Find opportunities to use new skills or strategies in different situations. Build successful strategies into your routine and visual supports e.g. make a prompt for a safe place so you can hand them the card to remind them what to do if distressed.

N.B.

Know your child and select the right level of language to support them.