

## Understanding behaviour to support the sensory needs of children with autism

This GPP aims to support understanding of the what's behind behaviour so that timely advice and support can be offered to families, tailored to the needs of the child.

Behaviour, even when it appears different, is always about meeting a need. Everything we do is driven by our needs, which are common to all adults and children. People and children with autism have some additional needs. By understanding underlying behaviours, we can support children to explore their potential and to have their needs met in a different way if their behaviour is harmful or challenging. Understanding the needs that underly behaviour may help with accepting some behaviours that can be challenging. This can be especially difficult when a child has difficulty with communication or understanding their feelings and emotions, which is common for children with autism (National Autistic Society, 2020).

Everyone has basic physical needs for food, warmth, shelter, exercise etc, as well as the psychological and emotional need to belong, be loved, and accepted by others.



(Health Education and Improvement Wales, 2020)

We have needs for freedom and the sense of independence, and then there is the need to feel secure and for clear rules, boundaries, and fairness. Children with autism have all these needs and often have a heightened need for clear rules and upheld boundaries. They also often have additional sensory needs because their brains are 'wired' differently, affecting the way information is processed.

**More information on page 2**

For additional resources see [www.ihv.org.uk](http://www.ihv.org.uk)

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## Some examples of how children may communicate their needs:

- Attention-seeking behaviours such as making noises to gain attention.
- Belonging e.g. not wanting to go to bed when other members of the household are still up.
- Independent behaviour such as choosing their own clothes.
- Explore and learn in unusual ways such as finger painting with face cream or toothpaste.
- Need to be useful - a child putting toys or other items in the washing machine.
- Security - displaying insecure attachment, becoming distressed if routines change.
- Boundaries - a child testing parent saying 'no'.

**Note:** Although these behaviours have been highlighted to be examples of communication for children with autism, remember that these can be common ways for young children to communicate.

## Sensory needs and autism:

Some children may need more sensory stimulation, this can be displayed as:

- Chewing or tearing; rough play; preferring some textures; finding others 'prickly'; flapping; spinning.

Whilst other children need to avoid sensory stimulation:

- They will require a calm environment without noise, light, strong smells, and few people to manage becoming overwhelmed and distressed.
- Having breaks from parties, big gatherings, playtime at school, quiet 'chill-out' period after school. Not being made to feel they are being unfriendly.

## For specific challenging behaviour, using S.T.A.R.T. can be a useful tool.

<b>S</b>	Setting or environment
<b>T</b>	Trigger for the behaviour
<b>A</b>	Actual specific behaviour or incident
<b>R</b>	Response or reaction or consequence
<b>T</b>	Trait - autism trait or need or sensory need contributing to the behaviour

## A child with autism has a need for order, consistency and repetition

The child may have repetitive rituals and behaviours, daily routines that are predictable. They may get upset about unexpected and unplanned changes.

*"My son hated big shops and cried from an early age in bright, noisy environments. Understanding about sensory needs helped me understand, we have to plan trips to shops carefully and only stay a short time."*

*"Matthew has to watch his Disney film right to the very end. If I turn it off before the ending credits, he wants to go right back to the start again or will have a melt down."*

*"Jaydon kept trying to ride the tricycle up the slide ramp. He ignored my 'no'. When I used the Makaton sign for 'stop' with the word he 'high fived' me and complied. Maybe he was testing out my boundary."*

Sometimes a child's behaviour will be difficult to support and it is helpful to think about what the possible underlying need might be, and if it can be met in a different way. For example, regular planned breaks, or snacks when a child is getting 'hangry'.

Transitions can be particularly difficult for the child with autism, so visual schedules, timetables or symbols can be useful. A timer giving a warning of the end of an activity is useful in avoiding challenging behaviour.

It is useful to start with describing the actual behaviour and then going through the setting and possible triggers etc.

Here is an example that demonstrates the use of the START tool:

*"Lily is pre-verbal and became very distressed in her Early Years school. She was in her usual room with her usual key worker when she kicked off and needed some time to calm. This happened more than once. The staff realised the trigger might be the refuse lorry which was very loud and out of sight for her and she could feel the vibrations. Her behaviour was probably a sensory defensiveness. They were able to plan support and learning for Lily for the weekly bin collection to help her cope in future."*

**More information on page 3**

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A significant number of children with autism have difficulties with sensory processing and/or modulation; the process, by which the brain identifies, filters, organises and interprets sensory information for use.

The brain must Receive, Process and then Respond to information from the senses; sensory difficulties can be described as being similar to a traffic jam in the brain. Children affected need to have their levels of sensory stimulation at 'just right' to be able to cope and function well. It is not a question of a child "won't do" but "can't do".

Senses	Autism: Sensory Processing behaviour
Sight (eyes)	Sensitivity to light, colour, patterns, dislike of bright light, difficulty tracking movement, uses peripheral vision, head close to food plate or TV, likes shiny or reflective surfaces, distorted vision, difficulty reading/writing/finding things
Sounds (ears)	Could be sensitive to or not hear certain sounds, finds some sounds distressing or distorted, likes certain sounds and repeats them a lot, enjoys or avoids crowded/noisy places, hums or sings to block out other noises, talks loudly, does not respond to voices, difficulty blocking out background noise, gets annoyed when others are talking, eating or singing
Touch (skin)	Dislikes or seeks touch, prefers deep pressure to light touch, avoids personal hygiene ('dry' cleaning hands!), wears only certain clothes, delayed reaction to pain or temperature, gags at some foods
Taste (tongue)	Strong link between smell & taste. Licks objects or people, prefers or avoids certain foods, toothpaste refusal, eats non-edible items (pica)
Smell (nose)	Does not like using toilet or bathroom (especially public toilets), sniffs everything, difficulty with changing smells in an environment, prefers or avoids certain foods, may use smell to recognise other people
Vestibular (inner ear)	Balance: where we are in relation to the ground Travel sickness, may rock, spin or swing, may avoid or seek out movement, gets tired easily, has difficulty staying in the same position, needs frequent 'movement' breaks, does not enjoy sports or games
Proprioception (muscles and joints)	Spatial awareness of body: feedback from our muscles to help us take or avoid action Walks on tippy toes, turns whole body to look at you, flapping hands, bangs head, bites own hands, drops or breaks things easily, bumps into people, problem with fine motor skills, limited body spatial awareness, enjoys rough and tumble play.
Interoception (Internal state of the body: aids self-awareness and social understanding)	Allows us to 'feel' internal organs and skin. It provides information about hunger, thirst, pain, body temperature, heart rate, social touch, itch, nausea and the need to use the toilet. There is a close link between interoception, our emotions, self-awareness and social understanding.

## Good Practice Points for health visitors

When supporting families with behaviour that challenges:

- Listen to the parents' concerns without judgment or comment. Rephrase their concerns back to them and ask what they would like support with.
- Work through the START tool with the parents to understand the trigger for the behaviour and what their child is trying to communicate.
- Help parents understand that the behaviour their child displays is a way of the child expressing a need, addressing the behaviour without the understanding will not prevent it happening in the future.

- Signpost parents to local peer support groups and organisations for further support, such as:  
National Autistic Society (<http://bit.ly/37H9w4H>) and Ambitious about Autism (<http://bit.ly/3aLW1CX>)
- Agree a next step with the family including any support from your team.
- Agree when you will next contact the family to review how things are going and any further support.

## References

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