

# Essential Guide to Challenging Behaviours and Autism: Summary



**RESEARCH AUTISM**  
IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE  
IDENTIFICATION INTERVENTION INCLUSION

## Introduction



This leaflet provides a summary of our essential guide on challenging behaviours in people on the autism spectrum.

It provides the key facts about challenging behaviours, examines some of the causes of challenging behaviours and looks at some of the interventions designed to prevent or reduce those behaviours.

## Challenging Behaviours

The term 'challenging behaviours' usually refers to those behaviours which are likely to cause significant harm or disruption or which may result in someone being excluded from everyday activities.

Challenging behaviours include aggression, self injury, destruction of property, temper tantrums, defiance and oppositionality, restricted and repetitive behaviours, or wandering off unsupervised.

Challenging behaviours are common in people on the autism spectrum especially if they also have a learning disability.

## Causes of Challenging Behaviours

Challenging behaviours are often caused as much by the way someone is supported - or not supported - as by their autism. In addition, some people on the autism spectrum may:

- struggle to understand what is happening around them or struggle to communicate their emotional and physical needs
- feel they have no control over what happens to them or the chance to make choices about what they want to do
- be in pain or discomfort as a result of physical problems such as ear ache or stomach ache
- have sensory processing differences, which can cause an aversion to noise or bright lighting or difficulties knowing where their bodies are in space
- be reacting to change or unfamiliar situations or events. Many autistic individuals find it difficult to cope with change of any kind, however trivial
- not be comfortable in social situations, such as having to meet new people, look people in the eye or answer questions
- be asked to do more than they can cope with, such as a task that is too difficult, too long, or uninteresting

## Learnt Behaviours

Some challenging behaviours may have been learnt. For example, if parents or teachers pay attention to or give-in to challenging behaviour in order to avoid further outbursts, a child may continue that behaviour. So, if the child is excluded from classroom activities (and is therefore able to avoid situations they dislike), they may continue that behaviour.

Some challenging behaviour may have several causes and these causes may occur at the same time, making it harder to work out what is going on. For example an adult may be responding to physical pain but may also be responding to the reactions of the other people around them because they have learnt that this get results.

## Best Practice

- Challenging behaviours can usually be prevented or reduced if the right kind of support is provided
- Support should be flexible and personalised to the needs and circumstances of individual families
- Support may be available from specialist services, although all service providers should aim to understand and resolve challenging behaviours
- A comprehensive behaviour assessment should include: a functional assessment of behaviour, a medical health check, a mental health check, a communication assessment, a sensory profile, and an assessment of any social and environmental factors that may affect behaviour
- A behaviour support plan should be developed, setting out what is likely to trigger the behaviour and how families and services should respond.

## Specific Interventions

There is some research evidence to suggest that the following interventions may help to prevent or reduce challenging behaviours in some people on the autism spectrum

- Medical interventions may help to treat specific physical disorders (such as stomach aches)
- Psychotherapeutic interventions (such as cognitive behavioural therapy) may help to treat specific mental health problems (such as anxiety)
- Behavioural techniques (such as rewarding the person to learn new behaviours which are less harmful)
- Augmentative and alternative communication systems (such as PECS) may provide the person with a more effective means to communicate
- Assistive and augmentative technology (such as visual schedules on computer apps) may provide information about what the person is expected to do and when

If the behaviour appears to be directly related to anxiety and stress in specific situations, then you can change the situation in which the behaviour occurs. Sometimes, relatively simple changes can have a significant impact (for example removing noise or clutter in the room or allowing a child to stay in the school library during play times if they find play times stressful).

## Further Information

You can find more information on this topic (including the full version of this guide) on our website at <http://researchautism.net/challenging-behaviour-and-autism>

## Research Autism

The Research Autism information service is part of the National Autistic Society, which is the leading UK charity for autistic people (including those with Asperger syndrome) and their families.

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