

Teaching Your Child With Autism: A Short Guide for Parents



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AUTISM SPARKS

helping you find the sparks to connect with your child

Introduction

The first time I met Emma she was 12 years old, sitting in a sand box and quietly engaged in filtering sand through her fingers. Her cabin counselor was sitting some distance away watching her at play; she had worked with Emma long enough to know that she would be in the sand box for a while yet.

When I sat down at the edge of the sand box, Emma seemed to hardly notice. I picked up some sand and started to filter it through my fingers for a while, Emma still took very little notice of me. After a while I picked up some more sand and gently poured it into Emma's hand just as she was about to pour sand from one hand over the fingers of the other hand. Emma opened her hand to catch the sand I was offering her. A little look up at me from Emma. A tiny spark of connection. We continued this little game for about half an hour, little by little, Emma began to trust me to be her partner in what had previously been her own little game, and began to expect my turn in the game, holding her hand open for my little offerings of sand.



Over the course of that summer and subsequent summers, we spent a lot of time together in the sand box, on the swings, blowing bubbles or singing the same few songs over and over again. There was never an agenda, we just enjoyed spending time together. I was not doing

anything particularly remarkable, just literally hanging out in her world, but she adored me for it, because nobody else really did that. The more we hung out, the more Emma trusted me and would do what I asked, even though she would do little for anyone else. At first it was always me who approached her, but soon it was Emma who would run over to me when she saw me.

That first time playing with Emma in the sand box was 19 years ago on a summer camp in Upstate New York. At the time I was a recent graduate with no idea what I wanted to do with my life, autism was new to me – and teaching was far from my mind. However, that experience of joining Emma in her world has been a defining one for me, it is the reason that I eventually decided to teach children with autism. It is the reason you're reading this now.

*Since then I have taught many children with autism, and for the past six years I have managed a specialist provision for children with autism. The idea that has guided me throughout, is what I learnt back in the summer of 1992, hanging out with Emma in the sand box: **nothing is more important than having the time to play and connect.***

Thank you for taking the time to download this ebook. As the title says, it is intended as a short guide rather than a complete guide to autism (not that such a thing is possible anyway). I have done my best to keep it short because I understand that, as a parent, you are busy and your time is precious. However, I have packed it full of practical ideas and strategies that you can use immediately with your child, along with short explanations about why they work.

Children with autism are as individual as everyone else – indeed they could be said to be more so, as their individuality is less held in check by social constraints. This means an approach that works well with one child with autism may not work nearly as well with another. However, the approaches I will outline in this ebook are ones that I have found work well with many children with ASD. You will know what will work for your child – trust your instincts.

We begin with a relatively large section on play, for which I make no apologies. In my opinion reaching your child through play is fundamental to everything else you do subsequently. If you get nothing else from this ebook apart from a commitment to enjoy playing with your child, and the benefits that this will bring, then I will consider my efforts here well worthwhile.

Intensive Play – Building Trust and Relatedness

As parents, we are biologically adapted to respond to our developing infants' needs – we almost cannot help but engage in baby-talk when confronted with a small child. Interactions with infants are very much two-way events though. When a parent interacts with a normally developing infant, the infant is as much a participant in that interaction as the adult – there is a kind of dance.



However, studies have shown that children with autism do not provide their adult partner with the expected kind of participation. Without an appropriate partner in the dance, parents may not know quite what to do, and as this process gets repeated over and over again, the quality of the interactions may diminish – it's hard to keep going when your child seems to be indifferent to your efforts.

By being aware of this issue, you can compensate for your child's lack of appropriate participation, by carrying on as if they were participating. Persistence pays.

It is my view that most, if not all, children with autism respond to adults who insist on reaching them through intensive play approaches. When your child becomes more interested in you than in their own agenda, it becomes much easier for you to teach them. Intensive play teaches the turn-taking skills and joint attention that are invaluable for everything else.

Let me say a little more about what I am calling “intensive play”. I have coined this term here so that we have a concept we can agree on, it is nothing special or difficult and it does not need any specific training. Other people use similar approaches that are variously called: “intensive interaction”, “special time”, “joining”, etc. All I mean by “intensive play” is just that, it is playing with your child with your focus entirely on them – giving them your full attention during your play sessions, despite all the other demands on your time. Not easy in a world of mobile phones and other interruptions!

Play for play’s sake, play to have fun and to fully appreciate and enjoy the experience of being with your child. Sure you may have a whole ton of goals for your child, but while you are engaged in “intensive play”, those are side issues. The important thing is for your child to enjoy the experience of playing with you and to build a relationship based on trust and mutual enjoyment.



I have been using “intensive play” with children for many years (ever since that first experience with Emma), and have found that, with few exceptions, I end up with a higher level of relatedness with the children than other adults who work with them. For example, the children will initiate interactions with me far more frequently than with other adults, they will follow directions from me much more willingly than from others, and they engage in fewer behaviours to get my attention because they know they already have it.

When your child chooses to come to you and to initiate play with you, you can then start to scaffold their learning, and you will find teaching other things will be easier because now you have their attention. Intensive play has to start at your child’s

current level of development and be based around something which he or she already enjoys – it is no use starting with things that your child has no interest in, that can come later when you have established the trust. Intensive play creates that trust – I have worked with many children who would do little for anyone else, but who would nevertheless happily do what I asked. I put this down to trust and the fact that I joined the child in their world, rather than always trying to pull them into ours.



Find things that your child is interested in and encourage them in their interests. Join in those activities in ways that are acceptable to your child – have your participation be on their terms, but don't be afraid to gently extend what they find acceptable. A child who is fully engaged in something is less likely to be trying to climb up

walls or through windows, especially if you are right there also fully engaged! Be creative, go over the top, go crazy – if nothing else, your child will find you interesting!

Many children with autism enjoy rough and tumble play, and being chased and caught. Some children enjoy play that involves spinning, or being squashed. You will get a good idea of what your child likes by watching them at play, if they enjoy spinning themselves, find ways to spin them, or if you are very brave, spin with them. If they frequently hide under the cushions of the sofa, they will probably enjoy being squashed under a big cushion.



However, some children do not enjoy being touched. Others enjoy heavy touch, e.g. being squeezed, but not light touch. Yet others react very negatively to being touched

without warning. I am sure that you will already be very aware if any of this applies to your child! You know your child best, just adapt anything you read here or elsewhere to what works for them.

If there is one thing I want you to get from this e-book, it is this: join in your child's play, play on their terms, play for its own sake, play for fun! One of the core difficulties in autism is that of social interaction – other children naturally know how to play socially; you will have to actively teach your child how to play with others. The great news is that it is so much fun, and so rewarding.

Some Ideas for Intensive Play

If you are sensitive to your child's interests, opportunities for play will become apparent to you all the time. However, if you need some help to get started, here are a couple of ideas.

Join In

Whatever your child is involved in, join in – obviously you want to consider safety first, I'm not suggesting for a moment that you jump off window sills if that is what your child likes to do – in fact, you would probably want to discourage it. However, if your child does like to jump off window sills, then make use of this information about your child, take them somewhere that is safe to climb and jump off; that way you can enjoy joining in with them.



You will naturally want to extend your child's play, for example if they are pushing a car backward and forward, you might try and build a road with them that the car can go along. However, let your child dictate the pace – don't be in too much of a hurry to extend their play that you forget to establish a connection with your child first. Spend some time just pushing a car back and forth with them, if your child is protective of his or her space, then respect that and don't encroach too much at first – you can try inching slightly closer over time.

Bubbles

Many children just love bubbles! They are a great resource: very cheap, portable, readily available and easily replaceable.



Have fun! Blow lots of bubbles to get your child's attention. Get excited about the bubbles yourself. When your child is sufficiently interested in them, see if you can draw attention to your face by pausing with the wand to your lips. However, remember that the interaction is more important, so don't pause too long or you risk losing your child's interest.

Balloons

These are just as cheap and available as bubbles. Some children may be scared by the potential of them popping though (some adults are too!). However, if you don't blow them up too much you should be safe.



Blow up a balloon and let it go so that it whizzes round the room making a rude noise as it does so. Get very excited by this. Notice if your child is paying any attention, if they are great, continue. If not, after blowing the balloon up again, go over to your child and either hand them the balloon or let go of it very near them. If this game goes well, encourage your child to watch where the balloon lands and to bring it back to you to blow up – this then builds much more into an interactive game rather than a spectator sport for your child.

Give them a balloon to try and blow up (although they may well find this difficult to do), so you can do it together.

Have fun blowing it up, be very exaggerated in your breaths – perhaps let go of it suddenly while you are blowing. Exaggerate being surprised that it has disappeared – if your child has been watching you blow up the balloon, they will now be looking directly at your face as there is no longer a balloon there.

Try different balloons – rocket balloons are designed to be blown up and let go, and they make a wonderful raspy noise.



Use Your Imagination

Now that I've got you started, use your imagination to find creative ways to engage in intensive play with your child. The opportunities are endless if you look for them. Fantastic resources can be very helpful, but remember the thing that will make the biggest difference in your play with your child is YOU. No other resource can be used as flexibly as you!

General Teaching Strategies

Get Your Child's Attention

Unless you can get your child's attention, you're going to have a hard time teaching them anything. Your child has probably already developed very strong interests – use them! If you can tap into those interests and use them in your teaching, the whole experience will be so much more enjoyable for you both.

If your child is constantly bouncing round the room, you might be tempted to think that you won't be able to teach them anything until they have learnt to sit and attend. However, the beauty of using highly motivating things to begin with, is that your child

initial one, may be too much. However, if your child really does take longer to process information, and you are conscious of this, then it does get easier with practice.

Something else to be aware of around language is that children with autism tend to take things literally as they do not have the social awareness and flexibility of thought to figure out what is meant. Consider for a moment the ambiguous ways in which we use questions without thinking, and you'll appreciate how sophisticated most children are in understanding what we actually want them to hear, and equally how difficult it must be for children with autism to understand what we mean.

Ros Blackburn, an autistic woman who advised Sigourney Weaver for her part in the film Snow Cake (a great film by the way), gives many examples in her talks of the trouble she used to get into as a child from not understanding the social use of questions.

For example, when the telephone rings and the person on the other end of the line says "Hello, is your mother in?", how was she to know that the correct response is not to say "Yes" and then put the receiver down? Ros says that each of these situations, which most of us understand without any problem, caused her difficulty and that she had to be taught the correct response for each situation.

When speaking to your child, take care to be explicit with your words so that there is less chance of misunderstanding. If you ask a question such as "would you like to ...", please do not be surprised if the answer is a straight "no". Unless you are asking a genuine question, it is much better to give a clear direction.

Teach one new thing at a time

It is tempting to rush your child when teaching them a new task. However, try to slow down and teach one new thing at a time. This may sound obvious, but your child may experience something as new that you do not think is new.

For example, working with two other people may be a completely different situation for a child with autism than working with one. Using different materials to do the same task may be a whole new situation for some children with autism.

Of course, you may find that your child is more able to deal with changing situations than this, but if they are struggling with a new task, look at it from their perspective to see what is making it so difficult. It is a good idea to allow some overlearning of tasks using a range of materials, and in different situations.

Using Computers

Many children with autism are fascinated by computers. So, rather than fight it, I say let's make full use of them, in all their various forms.



Some people worry that children “playing” with computers is unproductive. I say define what you mean by productive. Firstly, there is nothing wrong with playing. Secondly, where others may see a child being unproductive, I see engagement, excitement, joint attention, turn-taking (amazing how well children who find it hard to work with others can take turns on the computer with a bit of support), developing motor skills, creativity, following multiple step instructions (e.g. to find a particular file), learning from trial and error ...

And anyway, if you teach children to use specific programs on the computer and whet their appetite, when they “play” they often seek these programs out to use, and reinforce what they have learnt.

As you may have guessed, I love computers. If you do not love them, I challenge you to have a rethink - perhaps you are denying your child a wonderful learning resource.

A word of warning though – do think about how much time your child is using the computer on their own. Sometimes it is helpful to let your child have some calming time on the computer by themselves, but otherwise try to be involved.

Make it Visual

Many children with autism are visual learners – that is they seem to learn better when information is presented visually rather than verbally. It may be useful to provide your child with a visual schedule of their day so that they can see what is going to happen next – obviously you will have to spend time teaching your child how the schedule works. This may seem a lot of work to start with, but will prove to be well worth the effort.

A visual schedule could be as simple as:

Put on clothes
Breakfast
Brush Teeth
TV
School Bus

Each item would be on a separate card, attached with Velcro or something similar, and the items would run from top to bottom. As each item on the schedule has been completed, it is removed by your child and put into a “finished” container.

Your child learns that the item at the top of the schedule is what he or she is currently expected to do. You may have to persist with this, but a visual schedule can make a big difference for some children. One of the difficulties of having autism, is never quite knowing what is going on. Having a schedule that tells you in a very concrete fashion can be very helpful.

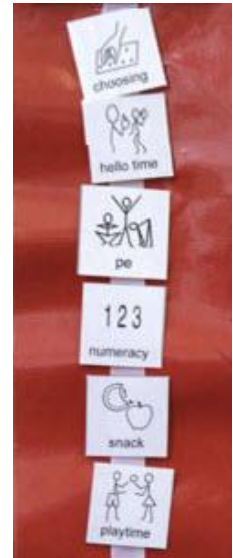
Obviously, you are in charge of the schedule – it is a tool for you to help your child understand their day, do not allow it to dominate you. Some children may want to

insist that the same items are on their schedules in the same order every day – do not allow that to happen! Make sure you change things on the schedule regularly (if it makes sense to do so) – otherwise your child may get stuck in a routine that they may be unwilling to come out of.

The example above was only to illustrate the idea, obviously if your child is not yet reading you can adapt it to whatever makes sense for them: you could use photographs, or symbols, or line drawings. Older children may prefer to use a written list that they can cross off as each item is completed. Do what works for you and for your child.

There are commercial software packages that can be useful in creating symbols or line drawings for visual schedules – perhaps your child’s school already uses one of these programs, ask them for advice.

Unfortunately, these programs tend to be quite expensive. However, there is a great symbol making program called Pictoselector that is FREE – check it out www.pictoselector.eu. It has been created by Martijn van der Kooij, a father of a child with autism.



To illustrate how well visual schedules can work for some children, here’s a quick example:

Maggie, aged 7, liked having her visual schedule. She would scan down it every morning when she first came into class, to see what was coming up. Maggie was not particularly keen on having to do work, but if work was on her schedule she would generally do it without fuss.

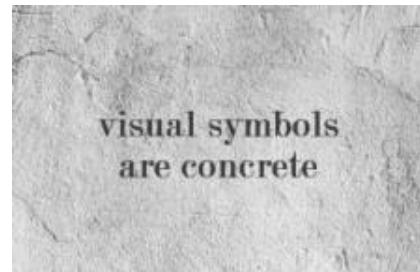
One day her parents asked if we could help her put on sunscreen on sunny days, adding that she hated having it on! The first day we managed to get a tiny bit on her nose before she put up a huge fuss. The next day, we put “sunscreen” on her schedule before “playtime”, and showed her the new card at the beginning of the day. When it came time to put it on, she could see that it was the next item on her schedule and allowed us to put the sunscreen on her with hardly any fuss.

The following day, we again put “sunscreen” on her schedule before “playtime”. This time Maggie came to me and requested sunscreen to be put on her! We continued to use the “sunscreen” card on her schedule and had no more problems with putting it on her.

Even if your child generally understands verbal directions, you may want to consider using a visual schedule because it can provide them with additional support. Children with autism often have difficulties organizing themselves; a visual schedule may help.

Remember, engagement is key - find ways to engage your child in whatever it is you want them to learn. In the case of visual schedules you may want to begin by putting only one or two symbols on their schedule to begin with, ending up with a picture of a favourite activity as the last item. For example, drink then TV. When you first teach your child to use a visual schedule, only put on activities that your child will generally accept without fuss – get them used to the idea of the schedule before you put more demanding activities on it. Once your child accepts the idea of the visual schedule, they are more likely to be able to accept less preferred activities when they are placed on it.

The last point I want to make about visual symbols is that they are concrete, a spoken word or direction is gone once it has been said, but a symbol card remains until it is removed from the schedule.



Some Thoughts About Behaviour

Clear and High Expectations

Children will test boundaries, children with autism are not going to be any different. Be very clear about which behaviours are acceptable to you and then create clear boundaries, ensure that the rest of the family is also clear and that you all act with consistency. However, be realistic. A child with autism, by definition, has difficulties with social interaction – you will have to make some allowances.



Be realistic also about what lengths you are prepared to go to – do not create a boundary and then fail to enforce it, if you do, you may find that your child will keep trying to test it. Boundaries should be clear-cut. If you regularly engage in intensive play with your child, and they are enjoying playing with you, a natural way to minimize your child's tendency to push boundaries is to simply stop the interaction whenever an inappropriate behaviour occurs and calmly wait for more appropriate behaviour before continuing.

“put all your energies into making extreme whoops of delight when you are pleased with your child's behaviour”

A child with autism may not necessarily care to act in a way that pleases you just for the sake of pleasing you. However, they may well be very interested in your reactions – and a purple screaming face can be just as interesting as a beaming smile, perhaps more so. So, put all your energies into making extreme whoops of delight when you are pleased with your child's behaviour, and make the minimum of fuss when they engage in behaviours that are unacceptable to you.

Sometimes children work out which of your buttons to press to get an interesting response and then persist in trying to get those responses...

Johnny, aged 5, was adorable and very active. He often engaged in activities that seemed designed to get a response from adults, these included: shouting loudly, ripping books and posters, and peeing on the floor. Typically adults addressed Johnny's behaviour by telling him "no shouting", "no ripping", etc. However, this did not appear to have much impact on the behaviour, if anything it sometimes made Johnny even more excitable, and he would repeat "no shouting", over and over again loudly, while laughing.

What made a difference with Johnny was having clear boundaries and enforcing them with the minimum of fuss. Rather than telling him "no ..." whenever he did something he should not do, I gave him clear positive directions he could follow, e.g. "Johnny, come here", "sit down". I kept my voice and face as neutral as possible. When Johnny was calm I would then address the behaviour, I found that this resulted in much less excitable responses from Johnny. Most of his inappropriate behaviours disappeared in class in the course of a few weeks because he was no longer getting the interesting adult reactions he had been used to.

Having high expectations of your child's behaviour can make a difference. And of course, you will want to reward your child for when they are behaving appropriately. Remember though that your child may not be as motivated by pleasing you, as they are by getting access to a favourite toy. If you have been engaging in intensive play with your child, perhaps a suitable reward may be a favourite game that you play together. This would be ideal as you would be rewarding appropriate behaviour in a way that also teaches that social interaction is fun. Whatever the reward, for it to be meaningful, it has to be something that your child likes and not what you think they should have.



Aggressive Behaviour

Some children with autism may exhibit varying levels of aggressive, or violent, behaviour for different reasons, these may include:

- Frustration
- Fear
- Feeling out of control
- Sensory overload
- Wanting to be left alone
- You are in the way of something they want



The above is by no means an exhaustive list, I am sure you could easily add to it. However, it is useful to think about the reasons for the violent behaviour rather than just trying to address the behaviour itself. One way to look at violent behaviour is to consider it a form of communication. Most of us have many ways to communicate our needs, fears, and emotional states, and in any case have enough social understanding to stop short of violent behaviours. However, a child with autism may not have either the means to communicate appropriately, or the social understanding to realize that hurting others is unacceptable.

No matter how well you know your child, it is often a matter of guesswork trying to understand the underlying communication behind a behaviour – unless they are able to tell you. Sometimes it may be obvious what the communication is, at other times you may have no idea.

In the next section, “Teaching Your Child Better Strategies” we will look at more general strategies for teaching communication skills to your child so that they are less likely to resort to violent behaviour as a communication tool. However, in the meantime, you may still have to deal with the violent outbursts. Here are some strategies that may help.

Gradual Changes



Changes are inevitable, but often they can cause upset. If you know your child has difficulties with change, try to bring changes in gradually and with prior warning. Talk the change through with your child if they understand, use visual symbols or put the change on the visual schedule. Have a motivating reward available for your child once they accept the change, so that they can associate the change with something positive.

Distraction or Diversion

Once a child is very upset, it can be very difficult to calm them down. It is best to distract or divert them beforehand. If you know that your child always makes a bee-line for the chocolate-aisle in the supermarket, and will try to eat as much of their favourite chocolate as they can right there in the store ... then your job is to make sure they do not reach the chocolate-aisle – because no matter how upset they get with you for diverting them, they are going to be a whole lot more upset when you try to take the chocolate bars out of their hands once they get there.



Tim, aged 16, was over six foot tall and very strong. At certain times in the day he would try to march over to the dining-hall to get food. Once inside he would get very upset that it was not time to eat, he would then hit out at whoever was with him or try to bite them. If anyone tried to stop him from entering the dining hall he would just push them out of the way.

Once we had established the times of day the behaviour was likely to occur, we made sure that, as much as possible, he was nowhere near the

dining-hall at those times. With no opportunity to go to the dining-hall easily, much of the violent behaviour stopped.

On the occasions when Tim was near the dining-hall at these times, perhaps because it was raining and we had to stay inside, we were able to divert him away from the dining-hall whenever he made a move towards it. Again, not giving him the opportunity of reaching the site where the violent behaviour was most likely to occur.

By diverting him away from the dining-hall at these key times, not only did the violent episodes cease, but Tim eventually stopped trying to get to the dining-hall at all, except at mealtimes when obviously it was appropriate.

Giving Positive Directions

When your child is upset, their ability to process information is going to be further impaired. If you are giving directions when your child is upset, pare down what you say to the absolute minimum. When nothing else is making sense, it is possible that a short familiar direction will. This is what I have found in practice with some children. In the middle of a violent upset, they are still able to process and comply with short positive directions – by positive I mean only that they are instructions to do something rather than not to do something: “hands down” as opposed to “stop hitting”. Back to Tim:

Before we had worked out the strategy of keeping Tim away from the dining hall at those key times, we were dealing daily with a very upset 16 year old trying to get access to the dining hall.

The natural response of barring his access to the door was not terribly effective as Tim was so strong. However, we quickly realized that if he was sitting down, he was much less likely to try for the door. We positioned a chair near the door to the dining-hall, and made sure



we always beat Tim to the door. Once Tim arrived at the door, we gave him a very clear instruction: “Tim sit down”. This usually worked, and Tim would stay in the seat for a couple of minutes before trying to get up. If he stood up, we would again repeat “Tim sit down”. If Tim started to wave his hands in the air, or to hit his head with his hands, we gave the instruction “Tim hands down”.

Sometimes, Tim would start to calm down while sitting in the chair, at other times he would remain very upset. While one person waited with Tim, giving him positive directions when needed, a colleague went to fetch cookies and a drink for Tim. Tim’s violent behaviour was communicating that he was hungry, so we wanted to attend to that, without rewarding the behaviour by letting him into the dining-hall and thereby making it more likely that he would repeat the behaviour in the future.



If your child is exhibiting violent behaviours, it is important to teach them alternative ways to communicate their needs, and to reward their use of these new strategies immediately so that they continue to use them. The earlier you are able to do this the better. Please do not ignore it. Violent behaviour from a three year old is much easier to contain and deal with than from a nine year old, let alone a 16 year old. Your child needs to learn early on that violent strategies do not work so that they will learn to use other strategies that you teach them.

Teaching Your Child Better Strategies

All children, particularly when they are young, get upset and express it. However, children with ASD often continue to express their upsets loudly, and sometimes violently, well beyond when most other children would have learnt to use more socially appropriate strategies.

Sometimes it may be obvious what your child is upset about, they may be able to tell you or to show you. At other times, upsets can occur for no obvious reason, and you are left wondering what happened.



If you know the source of the upset, removing it may help to calm your child down, but that's often not easy. Sometimes it is just best to avoid situations that you know your child is going to find difficult. However, at other times this is just not possible, or is not really practicable. So, we need to look at situations that are mildly upsetting as potential learning opportunities.

Many children with ASD are non-verbal, and for these children it is clear that their inability to communicate verbally can lead to frustration and upset. However, communication difficulties are at the core of autism, and we cannot assume that even if a child can speak, they will be able to communicate their upset in a calm, measured way. Their instinctive reaction may be to scream, run off or hit out. We have to teach alternative strategies, some of which may be appropriate for a wide range of situations, some may be more situation specific.

Teaching “No ...”

“No” is a very useful word, and is much more appropriate than screaming, running off or hitting out. Teach it in situations where your child is mildly upset (do not try to teach anything when your child is very upset), for example if your child screams every time you offer them an apple, keep the apple there while you say “no apple”, and wait

to see if they repeat it. If they say it, then remove the apple, saying “no apple” as you do so. If they do not say it after a few seconds, remove it anyway, saying “no apple” as you do so.

“No” is a very useful word, and is much more appropriate than screaming. If your child is not yet speaking, you can teach them to use an alternative system, perhaps of pointing to “no” on a card with the words “yes” and “no” printed on it. Or you can teach them to hand over a card that says “no”. Make sure you reward the appropriate communication by responding to it, and try not to respond to the inappropriate behaviour.



Once your child has learnt to say “no” to things, try to respect the “no” as often as you can to begin with – you want them to be motivated to use this strategy rather than the screaming strategy they were using before! When you think your child is now using the new strategy consistently, you can then try negotiating, e.g. “No apple? Okay, little bit, then finished” (show them the tiny bit you want them to eat).

It is also worth teaching the word “yes”, as this will increase your child’s ability to communicate their needs. It also allows you to get feedback from your child if you are trying to guess a request they are unable to communicate.

Teaching “Wait”

Sometimes children get upset because they want something and become impatient for it. Teaching your child to “wait” can help to ward off such potential upsets. To begin



teaching this concept choose situations where your child actually wants something and then artificially telling them to “wait” for a few seconds before giving it to them. It may be helpful to have something concrete you can hand over to your child while they wait, for example a card with the word “wait” written on it. When the waiting time is over, take back the

“wait” card and give your child the item they wanted. Each time you do this, make the

time very slightly longer. Eventually, your child will begin to accept that “wait” means that they can have the item, but not just yet.

If your child finds waiting very difficult, it may be better to start teaching them to wait for things they like, but that are not their absolute favourites.

Teaching “Functional Communication”

Children with autism may also become frustrated and upset because they are not able to communicate their wants and needs. Your child may have some strategies which they use quite well, for example dragging you across the room to the thing they want you to get, but what if they want something that is not in the room?

One intervention I have found useful is The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) www.pecs.com.



PECS is a systematic program to teach children to communicate with other people, by making use of the things they are most motivated by – engagement again. It begins by teaching children to exchange a picture card of something they want for that item. The beauty of teaching the “exchange” is that children have to find someone to exchange the card with. PECS teaches the child an effective strategy for making requests that does not involve the child getting upset.

To begin with, while the child is learning the system, all requests are honoured, but when the child is using the new strategy confidently, they will be expected to understand that sometimes they have to wait, and sometimes the item is unavailable.

Mark, aged 6, had very little language and did not communicate his needs verbally. He had very clear ideas about what he wanted to do, and would get equipment from different parts of the classroom to do his activities. Quite often this would involve him climbing to reach things, which had safety implications.

I made symbol cards for all the bits of equipment he was using from around the room, and showed him that we would get them for him if he requested them using his PECS book. Instantly he started making his requests of all the different adults in the room.

The result of this was that the climbing behaviour stopped completely; Mark was now initiating interactions with all the adults on a frequent basis daily; and each time he made a request of an adult he had the opportunity to practise his speech in a motivating context. What makes this system work so well is that its starting point is what the child is already motivated by.

What motivated Mark the most at that time was sticky tape, which he covered the whole classroom with, but that's another story!



Mark's language developed quite well after that, and increasingly he was able to make verbal requests without having to use his PECS book, but it was always there to support him when he needed it. He was in control of it, and could use it or not. Our only interest was that he had a way of communicating his needs in a way that made sense to a range of people. PECS gave him that while he needed it.

If All Else Fails

Sometimes you have no choice but to give your child what they want, or to remove the source of the upset, when your child behaves inappropriately. The trouble with removing the source of the upset while your child is still upset, or of giving your child the thing they are screaming for, is that this is likely to reinforce the behaviour, and they are more likely to repeat it. So, if it is not too distressing for you or your child, it is often best to wait until the upset subsides before giving them what they want.

Obviously this is not always possible, and there are many situations, particularly when you are away from home, where you just have to do whatever you can to calm your child down as quickly as possible.

However, afterwards, think about how you can turn this situation into a future opportunity for teaching your child an appropriate strategy to deal with the upset. Think about some of the strategies mentioned above. Is it a situation where it would be useful for your child to be able to communicate “no”? Or perhaps it is a situation where understanding about waiting would help? Or maybe it is a situation where they would be helped by being able to make a request? Here is an example where teaching wait was the learning opportunity.

Alex, aged 7 and non-verbal, would get very upset if his food was not on his plate when he arrived in the dining hall. He would clench his fists and beat his head hard, or he would fall on the floor and scream.

Initially, the strategy we used was to keep him out of the dining hall until we knew the food was already on his plate. However, this could not work as a long-term strategy - Alex would have to learn to wait.

On the first day we started teaching him to wait, Alex arrived in the dining-hall to an empty plate and was told to “wait”, but before he could make a fuss, food was put on his plate. The time he had to wait was gradually built up and after a few weeks, Alex was able to wait his turn appropriately, sometimes up to several minutes.

The Importance of Well-being

There are times when the world simply gets to us, and we just need to take a break from it all. My coping strategies include having a cup of tea (I'm British!), and finding somewhere quiet to sit down. I'm sure you have your own strategies.

Children with ASD can find the world a frustrating and confusing place much of the time, and will have coping strategies of their own. Some of these may appear inappropriate to us, but they are coping strategies none-the-less. Many children seem to engage in activities that shut the world out, for example putting their hands over their eyes, spinning coins or spinning their own bodies. Ros Blackburn, describes her own strategies to include “flapping” things – she says she still does it, but has learnt to do it in ways that are more socially appropriate, she will flap or twiddle things in her pockets for example, rather than flap things in the air. Temple Grandin says that when she was a girl she would spin coins, and that would shut out all the external noise.



It is important to try to understand some of your child's behaviour in terms of coping strategies. If they are exhibiting possible coping strategies that are socially inappropriate, then we have to teach them another strategy that meets their needs and is also more socially appropriate. Simply trying to eliminate such behaviours without allowing an alternative coping strategy is unlikely to be effective – would you be denied your coffee when you are tired or need a break?

Make your child's well-being a priority. When they are not in a good state, give them more time to do their own thing, give them more access to things that make them happy and calm, and reduce the level of demands. Do this **BEFORE** they have a meltdown. When your child gets into a better state they are more likely to be able to deal with everything else, including learning what you are trying to teach.

Children with autism generally have to work hard to process the social information that the rest of us understand instinctively, and this can be exhausting. If your child finds social encounters tiring, make sure you give them time afterwards to be on their own, if necessary, so they can have a break. Don't forget that schools have high levels of social demands too.

Final Thoughts

I hope you have found the information in this ebook useful. As I have said before, each child is an individual, and not everything applies to every child – only you can judge what is right for your child. My intention was to help spark ideas for you that make a difference for you and your child – I hope I have done that.

Use whatever you find useful from this ebook, and from wherever else you do your research. You know your child better than anyone else – read widely, take advice, but trust your instincts ... they have been carefully honed from your daily interactions with your child!

Whatever you try from here or elsewhere, please be patient, some strategies can take several weeks before they begin to work, and at first they may seem to make things worse rather than better. Do not become despondent, most strategies will work if you are persistent and consistent.

I would love to hear your stories of success, comments or suggestions.

Please email me at:

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I wish you a wonderful and exciting journey with your child. More than anything I hope you remember to play.

Alan

Alan Yau

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