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Emotions and behaviour

Moving from a familiar play-based environment to a new primary school can be challenging for many children. For children on the autism spectrum, understanding this change can be overwhelming and can have an impact on their emotional and behavioural responses.

Emotions affect children's behaviour in a number of ways. Young children on the autism spectrum are still learning to notice and recognise their emotions. They need support to understand and manage their emotions in positive ways. Behaviour that is difficult to manage tends to happen when young children are not coping with their emotions.

Children might become overwhelmed by what they are being expected to do, by the demands of the environment, or difficulties they have in expressing what they need. Sensory experiences can be anything from enjoyable to highly distressing for young children, even when they can't recognise or name how they feel. The way people communicate with your child at these times can either support them or increase the stress and distress they feel.

Video: Understanding emotions and behaviour of autistic children

What are emotions?

Emotions tend to be related to experiences, social needs and personal wants. Emotions are complex brain and body states that involve three separate responses:

- An experience results in body and brain responses usually followed by an expressive response (behaviour).
- The body and brain response is what we normally call an emotion. For example, if something happens that makes someone happy, that feeling of happiness is signalled to the person through the way their body and brain responds.
- For most people, the chemical reaction in the body is usually the same, but everyone's body responds to that reaction differently. One person may feel happiness in their face and stomach, while another may feel it in their hands and face.

How do children learn to recognise and understand their emotions?

Interoception, or the ability to sense signals from within the body, is very important in emotional awareness. By paying attention to changes in the body, such as the heartbeat speeding up or tightness in the chest, children can learn to associate these sensations with different emotions. Families and caregivers can help with emotional development by naming emotions, modelling healthy ways to respond to emotions, and giving children opportunities to practise regulating or managing their emotions. Modelling emotions for children can include reading stories, and talking about your own and others' emotions and how you recognised the emotion.

The use of emoticons and emotional expression toys can help children learn words connected to emotions, but in themselves these do not help children learn to recognise and understand their own emotions.



Emotion toys can be made at home and used to name and label emotions.

Here are some simple ways you can help your child to recognise their emotions:

- Name and label emotions, both their own and others', and discuss how emotions can affect behaviour. For example: 'I wonder if your sister is angry at the moment; she is banging and yelling. She often does that when she is angry.'
- Talk about ways to regulate and express emotions in a constructive way. For example: 'I am very stressed today, so I'm going to do some belly breathing to calm down before I go off to work.' It is important to show children how to express anger and frustration in helpful ways rather than trying to prevent these emotions from happening.
- Model healthy emotional regulation and strategies to return to calm. For example: 'I can see that it's really frustrating trying to zip up your backpack. I like how you came and asked me for help. Let's do it together so hopefully it will be less frustrating next time.'
- Explore social and emotional skills through activities like role-playing, reading books, viewing videos or television, and playing games together. Talk about the social rules in these activities that children on the autism spectrum can miss, such as taking turns. Or talk about a character's actions and the impact they have on others.
- Use photographs or drawings of different emotions to play games that link responses to emotions.
- Talk about body responses to an emotion, for example, 'You look worried. Are you feeling sick in the tummy?'

We often make assumptions that younger children or children who are minimally verbal or have no language can't give an opinion, but often they're giving an opinion with their behaviour. And through that behaviour, we can actually help to model better ways to provide or express their views on things.

*— Professor Beth Sagers, School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education,
Queensland University of Technology*

What experiences might stress, distress or overwhelm a child?

Children, like most people, can become more stressed, distressed or overwhelmed when they are unwell, tired or hungry. These experiences for young children can include:

- changes in routine or environment
- sensory overload
- difficulty with social interactions and communication
- overstimulation from technology or screens
- unfamiliar or challenging activities or tasks
- unfamiliar people or places
- unmet support needs in any area.

What strategies could I use to help my child regulate their behaviour?

- Provide a quiet and calm space for the child to go to that is their 'safe space'.
- As a break, encourage sensory regulation activities such as wearing headphones, deep breathing, stretching, stimming or fidgeting.
- Make sure there is some free time during the day when your child can take a break to do something they are interested in and that makes them feel calm, safe and happy.
- Encourage your child to do something they enjoy, such as playing with a toy or listening to music.
- If your child is interested, being involved in activities such as sports or hobbies can help build emotional regulation and social skills. If they are not interested, this may result in them being more overwhelmed.
- Do some [mindful body awareness activities](#), such as belly breathing and hand stretches.
- Encourage physical activity, such as going for a walk or playing outside.
- Create a visual schedule or countdown to help the child understand when a break is coming.
- Provide some downtime for relaxation after school or other activities.



Listening to music can help children to self-regulate.