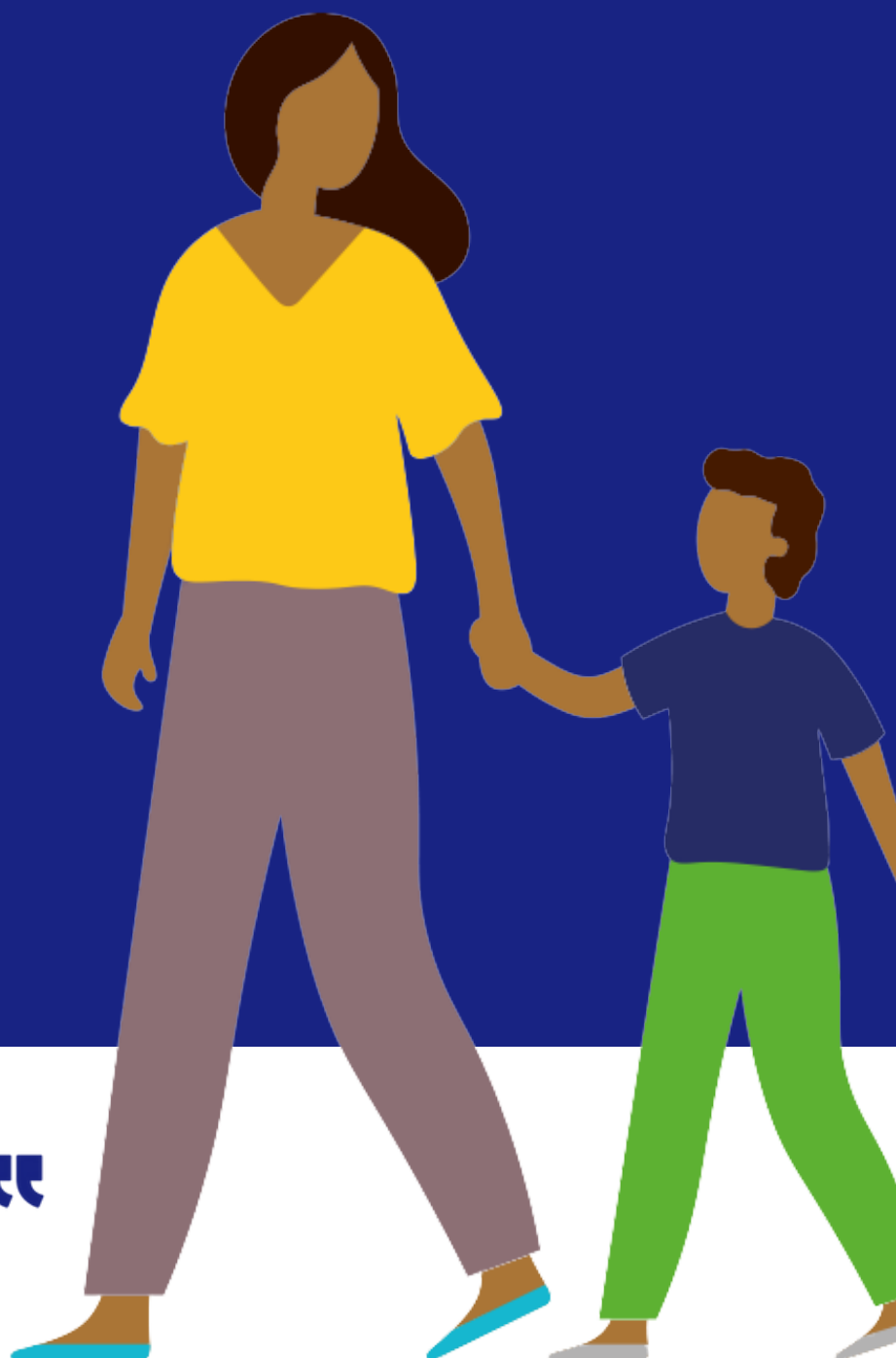


Understanding autistic behaviours in children



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One of the most challenging aspects of parenting an autistic child can be responding to some of their behaviours. Your autistic child may well behave differently to other, non-autistic children, and you may not understand why they are doing so or how to react. You want to be the best parent you possibly can be for them, as is natural. This resource aims to give an overview of why autistic children sometimes behave differently, and to provide suggestions for approaches to these behaviours for their parents and carers.

It is important to be very clear about 2 points from the outset. Firstly, the behaviours of your autistic child are neither your fault nor their fault, and they do not mean that your child is naughty or that you are a bad parent. Secondly, all children, including autistic children, are different. So not all approaches will work with all children.

You know your child better than anyone, and you are best placed to consider and find the approaches that work best in your family, while of course being open to suggestions of other things to try, particularly from medical professionals and other parents of autistic children.

But just because something worked for one autistic child does not mean that it will work for yours, and you are not doing it wrong if it does not work.

Why do autistic children behave differently?

One definition of behaviour is the way that a particular person responds to a situation. We are all individuals, and we can all respond differently to the same trigger. For example, if you had a bad experience with a dog when you were young and are approached in the park by a large dog with sharp teeth that is growling at you, you will likely respond very differently to someone who loves dogs and has met that dog many times before and become good friends with it! Think of how some of us love certain foods that others hate – why do we have wildly different reactions to the same things?

Autistic people have brains that work differently to the brains of others. They are not better or worse than other brains, just different. Given that the brain is the major processor of what we sense and how we respond to things, it makes sense that autistic people may respond very differently in some situations.

This is why different behaviour in autistic children is not the fault of them or their parents, but as with all responses, it may be possible for it to be managed and moderated over time, or at least for parents to gain understanding of what causes stress and what has a calming effect for their child.

Stimming

Stimming is short for self-stimulating behaviour and is very common in autistic people. It generally takes the form of an action repeated over and over again which has a calming effect on the person and is also a sign that they are stressed in some way.

Stimming can consist of a wide variety of actions, such as flapping hands, tapping feet, repeating words or sounds, or staring at patterns or lights among many others. As long as there is no risk to the person from what they are doing (such as banging their head against something, for example), stimming is completely harmless and stopping it may cause further stress and make things worse.



The main issue which can arise from stimming is the stigma attached to it from other people with little knowledge or understanding of autism. This is best countered by trying to explain what is happening if you feel able, but unfortunately there is still a great deal of ignorance about autism in our society. . In some cases you may just need to try and protect your child and avoid unhelpful remarks as you would in any other situation where people say unkind things, though it can be extremely upsetting.

One thing you may be able to do for your child is to facilitate or channel their stimming by providing a fidget toy or a particular object that they like to hold or touch. This may stop them from seeking out less appropriate ways of exercising the impulse to stim - for example, better the child rubs a piece of fabric that you can wash regularly rather than touching all sorts of other things which may be unhygienic.

Giving a child a fidget toy to play with may be helpful in a situation where a reasonable level of quiet and stillness is required.

Meltdowns

Meltdowns happen when an autistic person becomes overwhelmed by a situation, cannot cope and loses control of themselves. This can exhibit itself in different ways, the best known for a child perhaps being lying down crying or shouting and refusing to respond to anything. This can be incredibly difficult for parents and others around them, but it is also an awful experience for the person suffering the meltdown.

A meltdown, whether you're a child or an adult, can leave you drained, exhausted and possibly embarrassed. Meltdowns are entirely different from temper tantrums to get your own way, though they may superficially appear similar sometimes.

The best way to manage meltdowns in your autistic child is to do what you can to avoid them happening in the first place. This means getting to know your child really well, and in particular identifying things and situations which they find difficult. The fact that something is not an issue for others present is not a factor, so if an autistic child finds a sound or a place too loud or bright, that is how they find it even if it seems fine to others.

One major cause of meltdowns can be changes to routine. These are inevitable sometimes, but you can manage the impact on your child by giving them plenty of advance warning if possible and talking through with them exactly what is going to happen and why, then giving them time to digest this and ask questions.

But however hard you try to avoid triggering situations, meltdowns may still happen from time to time, and these are not the fault of you or your child. The best thing you can do is to have a plan in place of how you can best help and care for your child when a meltdown does take place.

Your first priority when a meltdown happens is to make sure that your child cannot hurt themselves or anyone else. The easiest way to do this may be to hug them, which they may also find comforting and may start the calming process. If you cannot hug them, try to get them to a safe space or move things away from them that could hurt them.



The next step is to try to introduce things that you know your child finds calming. This could be music or sounds on headphones, dimming lighting or even putting sunglasses on your child, giving them a favourite toy or fidget device to distract them and so on. You know your child best, and you will learn over time what works best for them.

It is very important that you stay calm throughout the meltdown and do not show your child signs of stress, anxiety or embarrassment as your child will quickly pick up on these and they may make the meltdown worse.

A meltdown in a public place can be difficult, particularly if other start to comment or stare. Understand that this is simply ignorance on their part and not a meaningful judgment of you or your child. Some parents of autistic children find it helpful to carry small cards explaining that their child is autistic and what this means to such people if required.

Finally, understand that you cannot rush recovery from a meltdown. The biggest healing factor of all is time, however frustrating this may be for both you and your child. Rushing things will almost certainly make the situation worse and probably last even longer.