

Developmentally Friendly Ways of Working

Strategies for Parents

Your child may have some specific behavioural difficulties, which may be related to their understanding of particular types of communication and skills. This handout aims to highlight some of these difficulties you may have noticed, and what strategies may be helpful in addressing these. The examples given here are not concrete, and will vary in importance between children; your child may have some, all, or very few of these traits.

1. Social Communication

This relates to using words and language flexibly and appropriate to the context or situation. It also means being able to understand other people's use of language, both verbal (i.e. spoken words) and non-verbal (i.e. body language, eye contact, facial expressions, posture, gestures and awareness of personal space).

Your child may have difficulties in social communication, such as:

- have difficulty understanding and using gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice
- find it difficult to respond to questions and instructions, particularly longer instructions or questions
- have difficulty in starting and maintaining a conversation or engaging with 'chit-chat'
- take phrases literally, which can make it difficult to "read between the lines" with regard to understanding proverbs, jokes and common sayings .
- repeating words or phrases others have just said ("Echolalia")
- use complex words, but not understand their meaning
- talk about a special interest they have, not noticing that others do not share this interest
- difficulty understanding different viewpoints, new ideas and broad concepts (e.g. 'good manners' or 'being good' may be too broad – specific and concrete examples of what 'good manners' mean may be needed)

Helpful Approaches:

- Get the attention of your child before starting a conversation (for example, tap on their shoulder or say their name).
- Reduce your language and use key words; reduce fillers (unnecessary words).

- Speak clearly and keep your sentences short.
- Allow time for the person to respond to what you have said.
- Say things in the order they will happen. Use "then" consistently to help them understand the sequence of events.
- Tell them what to do – not- what not to do; “walk!” rather than “no running!”
- Use pictures, symbols, gestures and actions to back up what you say verbally. Do not assume they have understood what you have said.
- Pick up on their own use of language and look past the actual meaning of the words and think about what he/she may be trying to communicate to you e.g. are they, worried, uncertain, or annoyed about something?
- Become a detective in working out what the verbal and non-verbal behaviour (e.g. body language) means to them and how they use it within interactions to communicate.
- Try not to use humour or sarcasm unless you are sure that he/she understands or is in the right mood to accept this.

2. Social interactions

This relates to making sense of the social world we live in and understanding subtle social rules that we assume everyone is aware of e.g. what to do if someone says hello to you. It also involves having an awareness of the needs of others, recognising and responding to others feelings and being able to empathise with others - putting yourself in their shoes and understanding how they may feel. Having difficulties in making sense of the complexities of social interactions can result in challenges to developing and maintaining relationships.

These difficulties may include:

- Finds it difficult to understand other people's emotions and feelings
- Finds it difficult to express their emotions and feelings in a socially acceptable manner
- Wants to interact with other people, but does not know how to do it
- Finds it difficult to build relationships and friendships with others
- Not sure of or does not understand the 'social rules' for different settings
- Unsure how to or does not want to share activities with others
- Unsure how to or does not like meeting other people
- Finds it difficult to recognise other people's emotions, likes, and interests
- Unsure how to or does not seek comfort from others.

Helpful Approaches:

- Accept that they may need some time alone.
- Try to make your feelings clear. If you feel happy, look and **say** that you are happy.
- Explain the boundaries and rules for a social situation and refer to them if needed (e.g. social expectations; saying hello to someone on the street).
- Encourage your child to interact with others, for example, if they like computers, could they join a computer club?
- Over time, help them to develop social interaction skills, perhaps by practising situations at home or in school. A social worker, teacher or other professional may be able to help.
- Help them to understand and explain their feelings. For example, give your child their favourite toy and say, "This makes you happy."
- Use social stories as a way to explain appropriate ways of responding in certain situations.
- Understand that some of his/her behaviours are a form of communication and are a way that he/she makes sense of the world.
- Encourage their understanding of situations by giving clear explanations about the reasons for people's actions.

3. Flexibility of thinking, imagination and behaviour

Some of the challenges that your child may face, or issues you may have noticed in this area include:

- Enjoys or requires structure and routine – becomes upset if routine is disrupted
- Finds change difficult, especially without prior warning
- Finds it difficult to guess what other people are thinking, or often gets this wrong
- Has limited interests
- Tries to impose routines on others, and becomes frustrated if these are not followed
- Believing that others know what they know – referred to as “mindblindness”
- Thinking in concrete and literal ways, e.g. misunderstanding common expressions like ‘pull your socks up’ and taking them literally

- Skills learnt in one situation may not be easily transferred or generalised to another context
- Limited concept of time
- Difficulty with sequences
- Difficulty linking events or actions - problems understanding cause and effect, for example – does not link behaviour with consequences
- Problems shifting attention from one task to another
- Repetitive behaviour - this results from a need for sameness, which can help to reduce their anxiety by making things more predictable
- Preference for sameness

Helpful approaches:

- Try to use repetitive behaviours constructively and incorporate the enjoyment of repeating the same action into everyday activities.
- Use a visual timetable to help explain changes and to work towards introducing flexibility and choices.
- Prepare them for new or future events by making things concrete and clear e.g. photographs, symbols, social stories and visual sequences of what is likely to happen. Build in options for change and what the plan is if something can't work. For example, if it is raining what are you going to do? How can you prepare them for this?
- Go over things in the order they will happen to help him/her organise this in his/her mind.
- Provide clear and consistent boundaries e.g. only respond to repetitive questions 3 times. For example, explain and warn them of this and on the 4th time divert their attention and do not respond. This must be consistent.
- They will benefit from everyone working with them in the same way. This will reduce their levels of anxiety, as they know what to expect.
- Structure your child's day, perhaps by using real objects, photographs, pictures or a written timetable.
- Provide time when they can do their favourite activities.
- Prepare them for change by telling them about it in advance.
- Use visual means, such as a timetable, to introduce changes.
- Make gradual changes.
- Encourage the person to broaden their interests. For example, if your child collects chocolate wrappers, see if you can interest them in locating the countries where they are produced. This may lead to them learning more about the people and customs of different countries.

- Help in developing these interests into hobbies, if possible. For example, if your child likes tearing paper, you could try teaching them paper folding or origami.
- Provide opportunities to develop new or different interests. For example, if your child likes water play, encourage them to learn swimming.
- Tell them what to do or provide fixed choice – option a or option b, as they may struggle to problem solve alone.

4. Behaviour

It may appear that your child behaves inappropriately, however these behaviours may be because:

- they are trying to communicate; both helpful and unhelpful behaviours occur to serve the purpose of meeting a need (e.g. getting comforted when upset)
- they do not understand the social rules
- they are feeling anxious, scared or frustrated as a result of difficulties understanding the situation, or experiencing sensory overload
- they enjoy a particular activity but do not understand its consequences. For example, a person may enjoy the sound of breaking glass but does not realise it is not safe or acceptable to break glass in public.

However you may not know why your child is behaving in a particular way. People may assume that a child is naughty or the parents are not controlling the child, simply because they appear the same as everyone else, and forget that there may be other causes for this behaviour. A psychologist, doctor or a specialist teacher may be able to help you manage this.

Helpful approaches:

- Work with your child to develop clearer means of communication (e.g. use visual support)
- Channel the behaviour into socially acceptable forms. For example, if the person likes clapping their hands loudly, encourage them to play an instrument like drums.
- Anxiety management and behaviour management go hand in hand. If the person is anxious or upset, find a quiet place where they can calm down.
- If you know there is an object that will help the child to calm down, such as a favourite toy, keep this to hand.

- Provide alternatives where possible. For example, if the person does not like loud noises, give them earphones to wear when they are out and about.
- Seek a doctor's advice if you think that there may be a medical problem
- Slowly expose them to some of the situations that they are finding difficult. For example if the person does not like going out to busy places, start with taking them out at quieter times. Later try taking them to a slightly busier place (e.g. local park) for a short period of time. Over time, increase the time you spend out and try at a busier time of day. Move up a 'step' only once they are able to safely tolerate the current 'step'.
- Provide time for them to do their favourite activity in a safe and containing environment

5. Environment

Your child may be particularly aware and receptive to the environment, which can lead your child displaying a number of strengths:

- Likely to be a strong visual learner. Using real objects, pictures, demonstrations and written material to explain things can all help with their understanding.
- A good eye for detail and accuracy.
- Once learned, information, routine or processes are likely to be retained. For example, some may be good at music, numbers, facts or computers.
- Some can focus on their special interest for a long time and may choose to study or work in related areas
- The love of routine can make individuals with autism reliable employees in an organised, structured environment.

Equally you may have noticed a pattern of challenges which your child may struggle with also:

- Difficulties in language development learning to read, write, and spell.
- Sensory sensitivities (sound, touch, taste and sight) in the environment. Your child may experience certain sensory sensations as unpleasant, uncomfortable or actually painful.

Helpful approaches:

- Pre warn them of noises you know they do not like and encourage helpful coping strategies e.g. cover their ears when there is a Hoover on.

- Lower the situation so that it does not overload their senses
- Be aware that they may have difficulty coping with being overloaded with sensory information when outside and you will need to plan for this, for example, going shopping when it is quieter.

6. Longer-term

The difficulties faced by your child are likely to be life-long. However the way your child manages these difficulties can be hugely beneficial to their development into adulthood. Good education and support can help most people learn skills and progress; some may go into further education and employment. This support can include addressing the core difficulties, changing the environment or behaviour of others and support carers understanding.

Examples of things you can start doing now are:

- Reduce your language and give extra processing time to make sure they have understood what you're saying.
- Use visuals to explain something or reduce the normal number of visuals, model or demonstrate the task you want them to complete
- Limit your child choices to fixed choices e.g. "would you like to do A or B?"
- Tell them what to do or what you **want** to see, **not** what you see, for example say. "use gentle hands" instead of " don't hit"
- Don't ask them to do too many tasks at once and keep the activities short to provide a calm space
- Tell your child what they should do when they are struggling with their emotions e.g. go for a run or go to calm down space
- Increase praise for existing good behaviour and ignore negative behaviour (but not your child!)
- Distract your child from triggers that may lead to unsociable behaviour (e.g. Songs, favourite topics, photos or visuals, games)
- Give "movement breaks" to help relieve tension e.g. collect the pens in class