

Anxiety and Support

Children with autism can have a tough time managing their behaviour. Even high functioning children can become extremely distressed in situations that would be only mildly challenging to a typical peer. Children with more severe symptoms can get very upset on a daily basis. Emotional deregulation and anxiety can make it very hard to participate in typical activities or, in some extreme cases, to even leave the house.

Causes of Anxiety and Emotional Deregulation

Unlike their typical peers, few autistic children react in order to gain attention or to get a desired outcome (a new toy, a favourite food, etc.). In most cases, autistic children react to physical or emotional stress without any particular agenda; they are simply expressing feelings of excitement, frustration, or anxiety or responding to "sensory assaults."

It's not always easy for a neurotypical parent to predict or even recognise situations likely to upset a child with autism.

Ordinary changes in a daily routine such as a detour on the way to school can be terribly upsetting to some autistic children (though not to others). Odours such as the smell of fresh paint can be a sensory assault. Even the bright lights at the supermarket can be overwhelming to certain individuals. At the same time, however, any individual child may react differently to the same situation from day to day.

In general, it's possible to predict at least some stressors and minimize them. For example:

- Very loud noises such as the sound of fireworks are easy to predict and avoid or minimize
- Major changes in routine can be predicted, discussed, practiced, and planned for
- Unavoidable noise and smells (such as dinner at Grandma's) can be managed and planned for in advance

It can also be difficult to predict an autistic person's reaction to a social setting or situation. The same autistic person who fell apart at a crowded mall may have no problem being in a crowded movie theatre (especially if the movie is one he's excited about). In addition, while typically developing children might have hurt feelings or even anger when excluded from a social event, a child with autism may not even notice the social slight. Alternatively, the same child who couldn't have cared

less about being excluded from a party might get terribly upset over a friendly fist-bump, perceiving it as an assault.

How to Recognise Reactions

Just as it's challenging to predict the response of an autistic person, it can also be difficult to interpret autistic reactions to difficult emotions as these reactions may take different forms. In some cases, reactions take the form of major temper tantrums, but other reactions can look very different. For example, they might take the form of:

- Screeching or other noise-making
- Bolting or eloping (running away)
- Intensive self-stimulation (fast, intense rocking, pacing, self-talk, etc.)
- Self-aggression (head-slapping or banging, pinching, etc.)
- Aggression toward others (in rare cases)
- Sensory avoidance (covering ears, covering eyes, retreating)
- Sensory seeking behaviour (crashing against furniture, squeezing into small spaces, etc.)
- Refusal to engage
- Compulsive behaviours such as touching the same objects in the same order over and over again

Some of these behaviours are actually attempts to self-calm. Others are simply physical manifestations of internal upset.

Tips for Staying Calm

Of course, the best way to be calm is to stay calm to start with. That means teaching your child how to manage his or her own feelings.

There are some techniques which, while not failproof, can make a big positive difference. Many are related to sensory integration therapy—an approach which helps people with sensory dysfunction to manage challenging situations. These techniques include:

1. **Offer an "escape hatch."** If your child is easily overwhelmed, be sure you and your child know what he should do if anxiety or frustration starts rising. Can you go outside? Can you retreat to a

bedroom and watch a favourite video? Just knowing there's an option can sometimes make all the difference.

2. **Provide your child with sensory toys that can help lower anxiety.** You can actually buy sensory toys, but easy options range from soft "squeezy" balls to plasticine (soft clay), buzzers (helpful for some children), and more.
3. **Consider purchasing indoor or outdoor swings and trampoline.** These are often great ways for kids with autism to get the sensory input they need to self-regulate. Small indoor versions are often available through toy stores; no need to buy a special "sensory" swing.
4. **Make or purchase a weighted vest and/or blanket.** For some children, these heavy items can provide a feeling of security, making it easier to manage the sensory assaults that go along with most school and community experiences.
5. **Consider buying "chewy" tops for pencils and pens.** For some children, being allowed to chew can make a big difference.
6. **Teach (and learn) meditation and guided meditation techniques.** Not all autistic children can use these tools, but many get a lot out of mindfulness and related techniques.
7. **Be sure your child gets enough physical exercise.** While most typical kids get plenty of time to run around and play (or participate in team sports), children with autism often spend their afterschool time in therapy. It's important for them, like everyone else, to get active.
8. **Teach simple methods for staying calm.** Depending on your child's abilities, options include counting to ten, walking away, deep breathing, meditation or (when appropriate) tuning in to a calming video or book.
9. **Add a pet to your family.** Pets have been shown to have a calming effect on children with autism; in fact, some autistic children have service or emotional support dogs whose primary job is to help the child manage his feelings.

Tips and Techniques for Calming an Upset Child

While it's great to simply avoid getting upset, real-life can make it impossible. When that happens, these tips for calming may help.

1. Very often, children with autism show signs of distress before they become distressed or very upset. Check to see if your child seems frustrated, angry, anxious, or just over-excited. If they can communicate effectively, they may be able to simply tell you what you need to know.
2. Look for environmental issues that could be causing your child's discomfort. If it's easy to do so, resolve any problems. For example, close a door, turn off a light, turn down music, etc.
3. Often, it's possible to simply leave the situation for a period of time, allowing your child time and space to calm down. Just walk out the door with your child, staying calm and ensuring his safety.
4. Have a "bag of tricks" handy to share with your child. Chewy or sensory toys, favourite books or videos can all defuse a potentially difficult situation. While it's never ideal to use TV as a babysitter, there are situations in which a favourite video on a smartphone can be a lifesaver.
5. Travel with a weighted vest or blanket. If your child does well with these calming tools, bring an extra in the car at all times.
6. If you don't have weighted items (or even if you do), you might want to consider rolling your child up in a blanket like a "burrito." For some autistic children, the pressure can be very calming.

Avoid These Pitfalls

In moments of stress, it can be hard to remember that autistic children are different from their neurotypical peers. It's very unlikely, for example, that an autistic child is being "naughty" to cause you embarrassment. It's also unlikely that he or she will react well to typical consequences such as time out- autistic children aren't motivated by social activities, so losing them is hardly a tragedy.

1. Don't attempt to shame or embarrass the child ("act your age!"). Not only is this a poor approach to discipline in general, but it will also have no impact on a child who doesn't connect with the idea of age-appropriate behaviour or interests.
2. Avoid trying to reason or argue with your child if he is already deregulating. Even a very bright child with autism will find it impossible to have a rational conversation in the middle of an emotional breakdown.

3. Avoid threatening consequences for bad behavior during a meltdown. Depending on the child, this will either be ignored or will escalate the situation.
4. Don't allow your child to leave the situation alone. Children with autism have a tough time understanding danger in the best of circumstances. Children are very likely to run into the street or another dangerous situation whilst they are having this breakdown.
5. Don't ask someone else to handle the situation. If an autistic child becomes upset at a coach, instructor, volunteer, grandparent, or another adult, it's easy to assume that a person will handle the problem. But the vast majority of adults have no clue how to manage a stressed child with autism. It's far better for everyone, including your child, to step in and take charge.

Information sourced from <https://www.verywellhealth.com/how-to-calm-a-child-with-autism-4177696>