

10 Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew

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1. Behaviour is communication. All behaviour occurs for a reason. It tells you, even when my words can't, how I perceive what is happening around me.

Negative behaviour interferes with my learning process. But merely interrupting these behaviours is not enough. Teach me to exchange these behaviours with proper alternatives so that real learning can flow.

Start by believing this: I truly do want to learn to interact appropriately. No child wants the spirit-crushing feedback we get from 'bad' behaviour. Negative behaviour usually means I am overwhelmed by disordered sensory systems, cannot communicate my wants or needs, or don't understand what is expected of me. Look beyond the behaviour to find the source of my resistance. Keep notes as to what happened immediately before the behaviour: people involved, time of day, activities, settings. Over time, a pattern may emerge.

2. Never assume anything. Without factual backup, an assumption is only a guess. I may not know or understand the rules. I may have heard the instructions but not understood them. Maybe I knew it yesterday but can't retrieve it today. Ask yourself:

- Are you sure I know how to do what is being asked of me? If I suddenly need to run to the bathroom every time I'm asked to do a math sheet, maybe I don't know how or fear my effort will not be good enough. Stick with me through enough repetitions of the task to where I feel competent. I may need more practice to master tasks than other kids.
- Are you sure I know the rules? Do I understand the reason for the rule (safety, economy, health)? Am I breaking the rule because there is an underlying cause? Maybe I pinched a snack out of my lunch bag early because I was worried about finishing my science project, didn't eat breakfast and am now famished.

3. Look for sensory issues first. A lot of my resistant behaviours come from sensory discomfort. One example is fluorescent lighting, which has been shown over and over again to be a major problem for children like me. The hum it produces is very disturbing to my hypersensitive hearing, and the pulsing nature of the light can distort my visual perception, making objects in the room appear to be in constant movement. An incandescent lamp on my desk will reduce the flickering, as will natural light tubes. Or maybe I need to sit closer to you; I don't understand what you are saying because there are too many noises in between – that lawnmower outside the window, Jasmine whispering to Tanya, chairs scraping, pencil sharpener grinding.

Ask the school occupational therapist for sensory-friendly ideas for the classroom. It's good for all kids, not just me.

4. Provide me a break for self-regulation *before* I need it. A quiet, carpeted corner of the room with some pillows, books and headphones allows me a place to re-group when I feel overwhelmed, but isn't so far physically removed that I won't be able to rejoin the activity flow of the classroom smoothly.

5. Tell me what you want me to do in the positive rather than the imperative. "You left a mess by the sink!" is a statement of fact to me. I'm not able to infer that what you mean is "Rinse out your paint cup and put the paper towels in the trash." Don't make me guess or have to figure out what I should do.

6. Keep your expectations reasonable. That all-school assembly with hundreds of kids packed into bleachers and some guy droning on about the candy sale is uncomfortable and meaningless to me. Maybe I'd be better off helping the school secretary put together the newsletter.

7. Help me transition between activities. It takes me longer to motor plan moving from one activity to the next. Give me a five-minute warning and a two-minute warning before an activity changes, and build a few extra minutes in on your end to compensate. A simple clock face or timer on my desk gives me a visual cue as to the time of the next transition and helps me handle it more independently.

8. Don't make a bad situation worse. Even though you are an adult, you can sometimes make bad decisions in the heat of the moment. I truly don't mean to melt down, show anger or otherwise disrupt your classroom. You can help me get over it more quickly by not responding with behaviour of your own that makes things worse for me. Beware of these responses that prolong rather than resolve a meltdown:

- Raising pitch or volume of your voice. I hear the yelling and shrieking, but not the words.
- Mocking or mimicking me. Sarcasm, insults or name-calling will not embarrass me out of the behaviour.
- Making unsubstantiated accusations.
- Invoking a double standard.
- Comparing me to a sibling or other student.
- Bringing up previous or unrelated events.
- Lumping me into a general category ("kids like you are all the same").

9. Criticise gently. Be honest – how good are you at accepting 'constructive' criticism? The maturity and self-confidence to be able to do that may be far beyond my abilities right now.

- Please! Never, *ever* try to impose discipline or correction when I am angry, distraught, overstimulated, shut down, anxious or otherwise emotionally unable to interact with you.
- Again, remember that I will react as much, if not more, to the qualities of your voice than to the actual words. I will hear the shouting and the annoyance, but I will not understand the words and therefore will not be able to figure out what I did wrong. Speak in low tones and lower your body as well, so that you are communicating on my level rather than towering over me.

- Help me understand the inappropriate behaviour in a supportive, problem-solving way rather than punishing or scolding me. Help me pin down the feelings that triggered the behaviour. I may say I was angry but maybe I was afraid, frustrated, sad or jealous. Probe beyond my first response.
- Practice or role-play – *show* me a better way to handle the situation next time. A storyboard, photo essay or social story helps. Expect to role-play lots over time. There are no one-time fixes. And when I do get it right “next time,” tell me right away.
- It helps me if you yourself are modeling proper behaviour for responding to criticism.

10. Offer real choices – and only real choices. Don't offer me a choice or ask a “Do you want...?” question unless are willing to accept no for an answer. “No” may be my honest answer to “Do you want to read out loud now?” or “Would you like to share paints with William?” It's hard for me to trust you when choices are not choices at all.

You take for granted the amazing number of choices you have on a daily basis. You constantly choose one option over others knowing that both *having* choices and being *able* to choose provides you control over your life and future. For me, choices are much more limited, which is why it can be harder to feel confident about myself. Providing me with frequent choices helps me become more actively engaged in everyday life.

- Whenever possible, offer a choice within a ‘have-to’. Rather than saying: “Write your name and the date on the top of the page,” say: “Would you like to write your name first, or would you like to write the date first?” or “Which would you like to write first, letters or numbers?” Follow by showing me: “See how Jason is writing his name on his paper?”
- Giving me choices helps me learn appropriate behaviour, but I also need to understand that there will be times when you can't. When this happens, I won't get as frustrated if I understand why:
 - “I can't give you a choice in this situation because it is dangerous. You might get hurt.”
 - “I can't give you that choice because it would be bad for Danny.”
 - “I give you lots of choices but this time it needs to be an adult choice.”

The last word: believe. That car guy Henry Ford said, “Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you are usually right.” Believe that you can make a difference for me. Autism is an open-ended learning difference with no built-in upper limits on what I can achieve. I can sense far more than I can communicate, and the number one thing I can sense is whether you think I ‘can do it’. Encourage me to be everything I can be, so that I can continue to grow and succeed long after I've left your classroom.

Great Resources for Understanding the ASD Child

Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew: By Ellen Notbohm

Every parent, teacher, social worker, therapist, and physician should have this succinct and informative book in their back pocket. Framed with both humour and compassion, the book describes ten characteristics that help illuminate – not define – children with autism. New updated and expanded edition.

CODE B43 \$28.95 (plus P & H)

Autism and the Extended Family: By Raun Melmed and Maria Wheeler

A guide for those outside the immediate family who know and love someone with autism. A diagnosis of autism in the family also affects grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. In this book the authors examine the complex relationships that develop, and are changed by an autism diagnosis in the family. It will help all family members cope with the stress and readjustments that will occur.

CODE B146 \$28.95 (plus P & H)

Thinking in Pictures: By Temple Grandin

Here, in Temple Grandin's own words, is the story of what it is like to live with autism, to be among the few people who have broken through many of the neurological impairments associated with autism. Thinking in Pictures also gives information from the front lines of autism, including treatment, medication, and diagnosis, as well as Temple's insights into genius, savants, sensory phenomena, and animal behaviour. Ultimately, it is Temple's unique ability to describe the way her visual mind works and how she first made the connection between her impairment and animal temperament that is the basis of her extraordinary gift and phenomenal success.

CODE B52 \$21.95 (plus P & H)

