

Understanding Some Common Problem Behaviors in Children with Autism

<u>Problem</u>	<u>Behavior may be Communicating</u>	<u>Possible Ways to Reduce Problem</u>
Increase in tantrums, self-stimulation, non-compliance, etc. in new or unstructured situations or seemingly "random" behavior problems.	Need for predictability and routine. Child is easily overwhelmed in new or unstructured activities and has difficulty attending to and understanding verbal instructions.	Increase structure of routine and communicate the routine to child using visual methods (e.g. picture schedule). Initially, walk child through routine and give rewards for following routine.
Increase in difficult behaviors during or near transition from one activity to another (e.g. clean-up, getting into the car, getting jackets on).	Difficulty following verbal/distal directions and remembering what to do next. Changes in activity are difficult to cope with.	Create a transition routine using consistent cues that a) warn of upcoming transition, b) indicate a task is finished & c) indicate what the next task will be. Visual cues (picture, object) may work best.
Increase in tantrums, refusals, or non-compliance when requests or demands are made.	Need for more independence and freedom. Child does not know how to communicate his/her desires appropriately or child learns that tantrums are more effective at obtaining desired object/activity.	Teach, practice and prompt child to communicate refusal more appropriately (gesture, picture, word). Respond to child's communication of refusal. Give child more choice in activities and teach, practice, prompt choice making skills. Also see below.
Short attention span, refusing to work on tasks.	Child can't remember the steps in completing the activity and/or doesn't know how to tell when the task is complete. Task may be too hard or too easy.	Implement structured work routine to teach concepts of "start" & "finish", starting with very short, easy, and highly preferred tasks. Give immediate rewards upon completion of task and increase complexity and length of task gradually over time. Perhaps increase or decrease task complexity. Alternate between challenging tasks and preferred activities.

Problem

Increase in problem behaviors during waiting times (e.g. standing in line, taking turns in a group, waiting in a store while parent is occupied).

Seemingly "random" tantrums, problem behaviors during loud or busy times of the day (e.g. free play), or just after busy times of day (e.g. getting home from school).

Problem behaviors related to frustration.

Unpredictable and mild aggression toward peers, inappropriate behavior with peers.

Problem behavior that results in a predictable emotional response from others and is not related to situations listed above.

Behavior may be Communicating

Child does not understand the concept of "wait," or can't keep track of when the waiting time will be over. Difficulty knowing how to keep calm during waiting time.

Child is easily over-stimulated, confused, and overwhelmed. Need for stress management skills.

Difficulty knowing when to ask for help, how to get someone's attention, and how to communicate the need for help.

Need for better social skills combined with an increasing interest in interacting with peers.

Child is trying to understand emotional responses by "experimenting." Child finds that his/her inappropriate behavior consistently evokes predictable emotional responses (usually anger) from others and this predictability is rewarding to child.

Possible Ways to Reduce Problem

Teach, practice, and prompt waiting routine that involves calming activity and/or a concrete way to keep track of waiting time (e.g. timer, picture cards). Teach child to request waiting routine and increase their ability to engage in waiting routine independently.

Provide structured break time in quiet area with calming activity before busy times and at regular intervals during the day. Teach child to request break time when needed. Increase structure during busy times.

Teach, practice, and prompt how to obtain adult's attention, and how to request help with gesture, picture, or word(s). Provide help immediately when child tries to request.

Teach and practice peer appropriate social skills with adult, and then prompt and reward these skills with peers.

Give child information about emotions. Help him/her identify emotions in self and others. Help him/her begin to predict other people's behavior based on their emotions. Good to start with basic emotions like happy, sad, and/or mad. Also try to respond to inappropriate behavior in calm, matter-of-fact manner and teach child ways to consistently evoke positive emotions from others.

**Please note that behaviors can communicate many different things. This is a list of some possible ways to understand your child's behavior which may or may not apply to your child's particular behavior.