

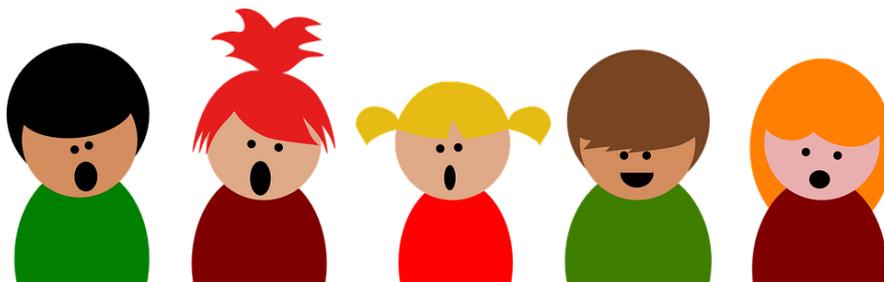


Managing Aggressive Behaviour

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and/or learning disabilities can sometimes behave aggressively towards themselves or others. Sometimes children with ASD and/or learning disabilities can sometimes express feelings such as anger, frustration, fear, or anxiety through aggressive behaviours towards others, or towards themselves. Children might kick or hit others, throw objects, or hurt themselves by banging their head, or hitting themselves for example.

When trying to deal with aggressive behaviour, it is important to try to understand why your child is engaging in aggressive behaviour towards themselves or others. Here are some suggestions as to why a child with ASD and or learning disabilities may engage in aggressive behaviour:

1. They might have difficulty understanding what is happening around them due to communication difficulties, and may find it hard to understand what other people are saying or communicating non-verbally.
2. They may have difficulties with communicating what they need or want—this may be due to expressive language difficulties. For example, they may not be able to express that they do not want to do a particular activity, or they want to get a particular item.
3. The child is feeling anxious or tense.
4. The child has sensory sensitivities: for example, they may be particularly sensitive to noise, or they may need some stimulation.
5. Aggressive behaviour may be a result of the child wanting to escape from a stressful situation or activity.
6. The child may be unwell, hungry, thirsty, overly tired, or just not in “good form”, and things they may usually find difficult, like waiting, can be more challenging, and may lead to aggressive behaviour as a means of expressing frustration.





How to understand the behaviour

Sometimes, understanding behaviour requires some detective work on the part of a parent or caregiver. Keep notes on the behaviour over a period (such as a week or two) to help understand what happens before, during, and after the behaviour, as this can help understand why a behaviour may be happening. If we understand *why* the behaviour may be happening, we have a better chance of knowing how best to address the behaviour.



It can be helpful to keep a diary to record the behaviour, or to use a chart such as an ABC chart. An ABC chart is another name for a Functional Behaviour assessment, and it helps us to record the following:

- **Antecedents:** these are 'triggers' for the aggressive or self-injurious behaviour—what is happening for your child immediately before they engage in aggressive behaviour? Where were they? What were they doing? Who was with them? These questions can give clues about what may be happening for your child prior to aggressive behaviour.
- **Behaviour:** this is the way your child responds to the trigger: What does your child do? Do they kick, hit others? Do they hit themselves or bang their head? What is the behaviour? Write it down in your diary on in the "B" section of the ABC chart.
- **Consequences:** This is what happens as a result of the behaviour. For example, if your child behaves aggressively, do you give them something they want? Do they get to leave a stressful situation? How do you respond when they engage in the behaviour? How does your child react to your response? All of this information can help you to understand why your child may be engaging in the aggressive behaviour. Perhaps they have learned that by hitting, they will eventually get something they want, whether that is attention, a preferred toy or something to eat, or to leave somewhere that they don't like (e.g. the supermarket).

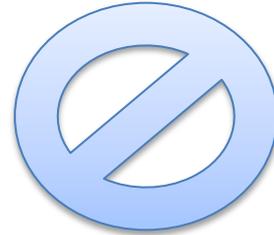
Once you have established either the triggers for your child's behaviour, or the results or consequences of the behaviour, or both, you can then try working on the behaviour by changing either the triggers or the results.





Preventing aggressive behaviour

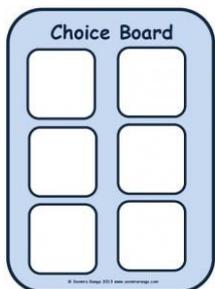
Realistically, you probably can't prevent every outburst your child has, but there are some strategies which could be used to help reduce the likelihood that an aggressive outburst will happen.



- Firstly, consider that there may be a **medical cause** for the behaviour. For example, if a child has pain (such as a headache, or a toothache), they may engage in a behaviour such as head banging—consult with your GP or dentist to discuss if you think that this could be the case and to provide medical support if required.
- **Think about the function of the behaviour:** Complete a behaviour diary (or use an ABC Chart) to record what happens before, during and after the behaviour. Also take note of the environment—was there a lot of noise, or bright lights? Use this information to act as a detective to help you figure out a possible reason for the behaviour. What is your child trying to communicate with the behaviour? Remember every behaviour serves a function. Functions could be: a) To get an object, b) To get attention c) To escape or avoid difficult situations or d) To get or avoid sensory feedback.
- **Minimise triggers if possible:** Once you have completed the ABC charts or recording the behaviour, you may have a better understanding of the potential triggers for your child's aggressive behaviour. For example, if you know that going to the supermarket for a big shop can be difficult for your child, maybe for sensory reasons (bright lights, smells, sounds, crowds), or for other reasons (difficulties waiting, wanting to have sweets/treats that are on view throughout the shop), you can try to limit your shopping to a small amount if you are bringing your child with you, and leave them at home if possible when you have to go for a longer shopping trip. You could build up their tolerance of going to the supermarket by starting with short trips (e.g. just getting a pint of milk) and working up slowly as they become more used to going to the supermarket and their tolerance develops.
- **Consider that sometimes words such as “no” or “stop” can be triggers** for some children to engage in or continue to engage in aggressive behaviour. Rather than using words like “no hitting”, try to use words which give this message but also tell your child what you would like them to do instead, such as “hands down”. This can sometimes be more effective than saying “no hitting” as the word “no” can have the opposite effect!



- **Establish a clear daily routine:** This will increase predictability for your child, and reduce anxiety. Try to build a range of activities into your child's routine to minimise boredom and restrict opportunities to engage in self-injurious behaviour or aggressive behaviours. Find alternative activities that provide a similar sensory experience, for e.g. jumping on a trampoline or swinging on a swing may provide needed stimulation.
- **Structure Transition times:** Your child might find it hard to **switch from one activity to another**, especially if it is an activity that they really like. When you tell them they have to finish a preferred activity, the child may feel upset and express this through aggressive or self-injurious behaviour, such as banging their head on the floor. Try to prepare your child for changes from one activity to another:
 - use a visual timetable showing the day's activities, or a First-Then board.
 - use a timer to indicate when an activity will be finished—this can be sand timer, or a timer on your phone for example.
 - encourage the child to put the activity into a finished tray or to put the symbol for the activity into a finished box to signal that the activity is over
 - use visual supports to show the steps leading up to each activity—see our website for resources on visual supports.
 - make the waiting time between activities as short as possible as waiting can be very difficult for some children with autism and/or learning difficulties.
 - consider making enjoyable activities available during transition times - a transition box, containing a number of different activities, could keep the person focused during these times, making an unstructured timeframe much more structured
- **Use communication tools:** Remember, that frustration from communication difficulties can contribute to frustration which may lead to aggressive behaviour. Support your child to use alternate methods to communicate their wants, needs and physical pain or discomfort, e.g. by using visual supports, potentially PECS—see Speech and Language Therapy guidelines on our website for more





information on communication tools.

- **Reward appropriate behaviour.** Provide frequent encouragement when your child engages in appropriate behaviour. Ensure that you clearly name the behaviour that you are rewarding, e.g. "That's good waiting!" and ensure that rewards are provided immediately after the behaviour that you wish to encourage e.g. a sticker, or other agreed reward which is motivating for your child (e.g. watching a favourite television programme, or engaging in a favourite activity such as bubble play). When your child plays appropriately with a sibling or other child, give attention to that behaviour, and reward them—whether that is by giving them praise, or using a reward system (such as a reward chart with stickers).
- **Try not to “reward” aggressive behaviour:** Rewards are given after you have seen a behaviour you wish to encourage, while bribes are given before an appropriate behaviour. For example, if you tell your child that they can have a treat if they stop hitting, this gives the message that hitting will eventually get them something they want. Instead, give your child a reward when he/she engages in a behaviour you want to encourage as this will give the message that the appropriate behaviour is an efficient means of getting something he wants. Sometimes we can give in to demands “for a quiet life”, or because it is easier, but this will only stop the behaviour in the short-term, and can inadvertently give the message to your child that aggressive behaviour is an effective way of getting something they want.
- **Support your child’s regulation with sensory activities:** Children with ASD and/or learning disabilities benefit from having regular access to sensory activities to help them to regulate themselves. See Occupational Therapy guidelines on our website for advice on how best to incorporate sensory activities into your child’s daily schedule, as this can have a very beneficial effect on reducing aggressive behaviours.
- **Use social stories** to help explain to your child why it is not okay to hit/bite/kick, and to give them alternative behaviours instead. See the resources on our website from the Speech and Language Therapy Department about social stories.





Reactive strategies: What to do if your child is engaging in aggressive or self-injurious behaviour

- **Respond quickly**: While ignoring can be an effective strategy for dealing with some behaviour, it is never appropriate to ignore aggressive or self-injurious behaviour which may hurt your child or others. For safety reasons, it is important that you respond immediately to your child if they engage in this behaviour. If the behaviour causes injury, ensure to bring your child to their GP or if necessary to the nearest Accident and Emergency department.
- **Ensure the safety of the child and others** e.g. give them space, or move other children away if the child is targeting them with aggressive behaviour. You might need to **move your child to a safer place**, away from anything that could hurt him/her/others – for example, shelves that could fall over or glass objects.
- **Respond, but keep your response “low-key”**: Reduce the amount of language you use, and use neutral facial expressions and other displays of emotion, as these may inadvertently reinforce your child's behaviour. Try to speak calmly and clearly, in a neutral and steady tone of voice, even if you are not feeling calm! By remaining calm, you can avoid escalating the situation, and help your child to calm also. Stay calm, but firm.
- Remember, that during an outburst, your child is likely to be feeling very stressed. This makes it harder for them to process what you are saying to them, and this is especially true for a child with ASD and/or learning disabilities who may have difficulties with understanding language. It can help to **limit what you say** to your child when they are in the middle of an outburst. For example, you can say “hands down” instead of saying “John, please stop hitting and put down your hands”.
- **Use visual prompts** to redirect your child at the early stages of aggressive behaviour. If available, redirect them to a quiet space to help them to calm down, and use a picture of that place to help direct them there rather than using too much language to explain it to them.
- **Keep interaction with your child to a minimum** until the moment



he/she stops an aggressive behaviour, and **then immediately give attention to him/her for their appropriate behaviour** even if the appropriate behaviour is fleeting. Withdraw the attention if he/she returns to the behaviour which you wish to reduce (e.g. hitting).

- **Reduce demands:** Your child may be finding a task too difficult, or they may be feeling overwhelmed. Come back to the activity again later when the person is feeling calmer if it is an essential task.
- **Remove physical and sensory discomforts:** Consider that your child may be experiencing distress because of sensory input such as a sounds, smells, or tastes. If you can, try to remove the element that is causing the distress. For example, if it is noise that is bothering the child, try using headphones or ear defenders or removing the noise if possible. If there's a smell that's bothering them, take the smelly thing away, or take the child to another room. If it's noisy outside, close the window or offer ear defenders. If your child is unwell, link with your GP for advice on how best to help them to feel better.
- **Redirect:** Tell your child what they need to do instead of the self-injurious or aggressive behaviour. Instead of saying “no biting”, for example, say “use your chewy”. Use visual cues such as picture symbols to support your message. Redirect your child to another activity that busies their hands and provide praise and reinforcement when they first do that activity, e.g. “John that is great playing with your toy”.
- **Use barriers:** If your child engages in self-injurious behaviour, place a barrier between them and the object that is causing harm. If your child is banging their head on a hard surface for example, place a cushion between their head and the surface. A cushion may also be used as a barrier between their head and their hand if the child is slapping their head.

Adapted from: <https://www.autism.org.uk/About/Behaviour/Challenging-behaviour/self-injury>

and

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/behaviour/common-concerns/aggressive-behaviour-asd>