

## INFORMATION GUIDE

### PROMOTING COMMUNICATION & BEHAVIORAL SKILLS IN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

**Social/Behavioral Stumbling Blocks** - The following is a list of some of the most common social and behavioral difficulties that children with ASD demonstrate. It is meant to serve as a general list and does not imply that all children will have all issues outlined below.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Poor/Inappropriate Attention           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 73% of children with ASD were initially or dually diagnosed with ADD/ADHD</li> <li>– Children cannot determine what they should be paying attention to within the environment</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Poor Imitation/Observational Learning</li> <li>▪ Motivational Differences (they may not be motivated by going on a field trip, or may not find staying in from recess to be punishment)</li> <li>▪ Poor Non-Verbal Communication           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Lack of/unusual eye contact</li> <li>– Limited understanding of facial expression and gestures</li> <li>– Unusual voice patterns such as speaking in a monotone or always sounding like they are singing</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Language Deviance           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Perseverative speech (Says the same thing over and over or talks about the same topic all the time)</li> <li>– Pedantic (e.g. talks like a “little professor”)</li> <li>– Repetitive question asking</li> <li>– Talks at you/dominates conversation</li> <li>– Lack of, or idiosyncratic sense of humor</li> <li>– Poor understanding of slang, idioms, figurative language, double meanings</li> <li>– Concrete understanding of language (takes things too literally)</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Poor Central Coherence/ Multi-Modal Processing           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Does not see the big picture</li> <li>– Cannot perform two tasks at once</li> <li>– Difficulty listening, looking, writing at once</li> <li>– Lack of generalization</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Excessive Need for Routine           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Highly rule driven</li> <li>– Perfectionistic</li> <li>– Intense focus on unique interests, such as timeline of dinosaur evolution, flight arrivals and departures from the local airports</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Lack of Theory of Mind           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– “Thinking about thinking” or “mind-reading”</li> <li>– Cannot take another’s perspective</li> <li>– Lacks realization that everyone has their own opinions, thoughts, experiences, ideas and desires</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Executive Functioning Deficit           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Our ability to problem-solve</li> <li>– Difficulty thinking of different ways to solve a problem or predict which solution would be the best</li> <li>– Poor planning skills</li> <li>– Poor organizational skills (can’t organize their materials, time)</li> <li>– Cannot stop thinking about certain things</li> <li>– Behavioral inflexibility (rigid thinking)</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Sensory Dysfunctions           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Over responsiveness to lights and sounds</li> <li>– Under-responsiveness to pain and temperature</li> <li>– Poor proprioceptive skills (understanding where their body is in space)</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Social Deficits           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Socially “awkward”</li> <li>– Wants to make friends, but doesn’t know how</li> <li>– Initiates interactions for only short durations</li> <li>– Prefers adults or much younger children</li> <li>– No, or immature, play skills</li> <li>– Can’t define a friend</li> <li>– Poor understanding of own and other’s emotions</li> <li>– Stereotypic understanding of empathy</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Motor Stereotypies/Clumsiness</li> <li>▪ Poor Fine Motor Skills</li> <li>▪ Cognitive Splinter Skills</li> <li>▪ Visual Thinkers</li> </ul>
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## BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS & MODIFICATION

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### When Do Behavior Problems Occur?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Unpredictable settings</li><li>▪ Unstructured or down time</li><li>▪ Responses from parents, others have been inconsistent</li><li>▪ Over-stimulating activities (including social activities)</li><li>▪ Situations that may show off the child's areas of weakness</li><li>▪ Change in routine</li><li>▪ Too much language is used</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The child does not understand the meaning of what is being said</li><li>▪ The child lacks the appropriate coping strategy</li><li>▪ The child cannot express/solve the problem</li><li>▪ Tasks that involve a lot of organization</li><li>▪ Large group activities, particularly if the child cannot lead the activity</li><li>▪ Lack of attention from adults or peers</li><li>▪ Not enough reinforcement is occurring in the setting</li></ul>
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### When to Intervene

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Best time is BEFORE the child has a "melt down"</li><li>▪ It is important to learn the signs that the child is getting over-stimulated, angry, frustrated or tired so that it is possible to intervene before the behavior happens</li><li>▪ Only discuss the situation with the child AFTER they have calmed down</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Do NOT attempt to "reason" or "discuss" events while the child is still upset, this will ONLY make the behavior worse</li><li>▪ Intervene on a positive note: "Thank you for being able to calm down" or "I'm glad you are ready to talk"</li></ul>
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### Important Notes About Behavior Modification

- A Reinforcer always *INCREASES* the likelihood of a behavior reoccurring
- Punishment is only working if the behavior you want to eliminate *DECREASES*
- Remember that what we think is reinforcing and punishing may not be- a child who has difficulty socializing or is feeling overwhelmed by a situation may not find isolation (time out) punishing
- Beware of the *EXTINCTION BURST!* When you are trying to get a child to stop a behavior, that behavior tends to increase before it goes away. This is called the extinction burst. You can think of it as similar to when you go to buy a soda out of a machine and nothing happens. You do not just walk away, but rather you push the buttons again, you shake the machine and you kick the machine. You only stop this behavior once you are sure that you won't be getting your soda. The same is true for all behaviors. If a child is used to getting attention for a behavior, and that attention is withheld, the child will increase their behaviors until they learn that that behavior will no longer lead to attention.

### Behavior Modification Techniques

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Always try to find the function of the behavior. There are typically four functions to behavior:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Sensory needs (handling change, emotions, dysregulation)</li><li>- Escape from situation/task</li><li>- Attention</li><li>- Tangible – (to gain a "desirable" item)</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ To modify behaviors, you need to do your ABC's:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Antecedent – "what happened first?"</li><li>- Behavior – "what did the child do exactly?"</li><li>- Consequence – "what did the child get from the behavior?"</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The three most important elements of helping your child maintain behavioral control:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Structure</li><li>- Scheduling</li><li>- Consistency</li></ul></li></ul>
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## Tips for Improving Behavioral Problems

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ First you need to find the function of the behavior,</li><li>▪ All behavioral issues cannot be addressed at once- it is important to prioritize which behaviors need to be eliminated first</li><li>▪ Try to pick behaviors that will help the child cope better with many situations That is, teach the child to be able to tolerate “no” before addressing anger over not having the right kind of cookie</li><li>▪ Set the environment to meet the child’s needs, then slowly tailor the environment so the child can tolerate more naturalistic settings</li><li>▪ Be willing to supportively push the child beyond comfort levels in order to handle more complex or distressing situations</li><li>▪ We cannot eliminate all situations where a child may have difficulty (e.g. unexpected change)</li><li>▪ We must prepare the children to handle such situations</li><li>▪ Ask yourself if the behaviors you are trying to teach are NECESSARY for the child’s overall well-being</li><li>▪ Work toward removing triggers, but only those that “make sense” such as removing napkins placed in glassware at restaurants if this is upsetting to the child as opposed to never using the word “no”</li><li>▪ Identify triggers by listing what would be a “Day from Hell” for your child</li><li>▪ Identify reinforcers or calming situations by listing what would be “Heaven” for your child</li><li>▪ Give a warning before transition is about to happen</li><li>▪ Build in transition activities such as doing stretches before moving onto another task, or having the child change a schedule before transitioning</li><li>▪ Use visual “reminders”/schedules</li><li>▪ Be Specific! Tell the child what you want them to do, not what you don’t want them to do (“walk” instead of “don’t run”)</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Be Consistent! Follow through with demands/ commands</li><li>▪ Allow child some choice/involvement in decision-making</li><li>▪ Beware of sensory overload</li><li>▪ Do not get “fooled.” The child may be able to say the right thing, but may not be able to actually do it!! (Saying, “I shouldn’t hit” does mean the child won’t hit the next time. The child will need to learn a replacement behavior before the hitting will stop)</li><li>▪ Try to reduce conflicts by offering compromise: If a child does not want to engage in a PE activity say, “You can be the score keeper, but you have to stay on the field”</li><li>▪ Acknowledge/validate the child’s feelings</li><li>▪ When you feel the child is reaching too high of an arousal level, provide quietness and space (dim lighting, music, etc.)</li><li>▪ Allow time to adjust to change</li><li>▪ Avoid power struggles</li><li>▪ Avoid threats of withdrawing powerful reinforcers (“I won’t love you if you don’t put your clothes away”)</li><li>▪ Learn to detect warning signs</li><li>▪ Teach calming techniques</li><li>▪ Be willing to change your behavior plan if it isn’t working</li><li>▪ Be a constant source of reinforcement!</li><li>▪ Model the behavior you want to see demonstrated</li><li>▪ Use what’s reinforcing- even if it seems odd (if the child likes to order things, allow him to alphabetize a different section of a DVD collection upon completion of homework)</li><li>▪ Do not take behavioral problems that the child may have personally</li><li>▪ Remember: <i>Most Bad Behavior is NOT Manipulative- it is Communicative</i></li></ul> |
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## COMMUNICATION

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### Using Language Effectively

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Always speak in a calm, quiet tone</li><li>▪ Give directions/commands using as few words as possible</li><li>▪ Initially repeat directions in the <i>EXACT</i> words used</li><li>▪ If child still cannot follow direction, simplify or rephrase</li><li>▪ Check to make sure processing occurred</li><li>▪ “Can you say that back to me in your own words?”</li><li>▪ Always stress what is most important- accentuate what you want them to hear (“Please go get your <b>BLUE SHOES</b>”</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Be careful of the order in which you give commands- try to avoid saying, “get some salad and get a plate” as this can be confusing. Instead say, “you need to get the plate first and then put the salad on it”</li><li>▪ Avoid adding “okay” or “alright” to the end of statements/commands (e.g. “let’s get in the car, okay” Adding okay or alright makes the command sound like it is a question.</li><li>▪ Do not use idioms, slang, sarcasm, until you know that the child understands the use of such “abstract” language Be aware of your own body language- avoid too much eye contact, over-use of gestures,</li></ul>
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### The Family’s Role

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Parents should be part of any therapy program</li><li>▪ Be supportive of the child without being enabling</li><li>▪ Intervention for children with ASD often involves a large time commitment on the part of families. Be aware of the time involved in a particular intervention and be prepared to make that commitment</li><li>▪ Try to discuss ideas or techniques that work with each of the child’s service providers. Find out what methods they are using and try to use them at home too.</li><li>▪ Whenever possible, everyone interacting with your child on a regular basis should be aware of these basic ideas</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Be sure siblings get some private time with parents</li><li>▪ Siblings can make good therapists! Help them to help the child, and the siblings will feel more a part of the “program” and the family</li><li>▪ Parents must also take care of themselves. Make time for the family and for each other. Go out to dinner, go on vacation (alone!) and have fun</li></ul>
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