

Extreme distress

Autistic children sometimes behave in ways that are unpredictable and uncomfortable for the people around them. This can include running away; hitting, kicking, or biting others; hitting or biting themselves; throwing things; screaming; or other behaviour that could hurt themselves, hurt other people, or damage things. In the past, this was sometimes referred to as “challenging behaviour”, but a more accurate way to talk about this kind of behaviour is in terms of extreme distress. Children only resort to screaming, hurting themselves, or attacking others when they need to escape a situation and they have no other way to do so. They are not misbehaving; they are so overwhelmed that they can no longer reason through what’s happening or regulate their emotions, and just need to escape the situation by any means necessary.

Any child placed in a difficult enough situation will eventually resort to behaviour that looks a lot like an autistic child having a violent meltdown – but because autistic children often struggle to be understood by the adults around them, it’s more common for an autistic child to get to the point of extreme distress without being able to communicate that something is wrong.

Some of the reasons an autistic child might have more trouble communicating a problem are:

- They may not be able to identify their own emotions. Many autistic children have some level of alexithymia, or difficulty identifying internal feelings. It's hard to tell an adult what's wrong when you're not sure yourself!
- They may know that something's wrong but not have the vocabulary to articulate it – if a young child doesn't know the words "sensory overwhelm" yet, for example, it's very difficult for them to communicate why the supermarket has become intolerable.
- Autistic children do not naturally use the same facial expressions, tone of voice, and other non-verbal cues as non-autistic people. An autistic child may look blank and speak in a monotone while telling an adult that they're in pain or upset; they might sound like they're acting or pretending; and in some cases they may even be smiling and animated. All of these can lead to adults not believing the child and keeping them in intolerable situations until they resort to violence.

Some strategies that can help adults to understand what an autistic child is communicating:

- Provide the child with an easy way to escape a situation. This could be a particular phrase the child says, a card that the child hands to an adult, a system of regular check-ins where an adult asks the child if they still want to be there, or whatever else makes sense to you and to the child. Giving the child an easy way to escape means that they don't have to work out exactly what's wrong and how to communicate it while they're upset and overwhelmed (and you can always work with the child to figure it out later, when everyone's calm).
- If you think the child may be having difficulty identifying their feelings, have a look at some of the strategies in our [Helping children identify their emotions resource](#).

- When everyone's calm, talk to the child about social or sensory things that they might find upsetting, at whatever vocabulary level the child is at. (For teachers, it is usually helpful to include the child's parents or caregivers in this conversation.) Figuring out that a child gets easily overwhelmed by loud noises can help you make a plan where they can avoid loud spaces or bring headphones, as well as letting you know to check in and make sure the child is coping in loud environments.
- Learn children's non-verbal cues. While autistic children often do not use the same kinds of body language and other cues as non-autistic children, they will have their own cues – keep an eye out for what they do with their body, hands, and voice, and with the objects around them, in the lead-up to becoming upset. (Some common signs that an autistic child may be becoming overwhelmed include blocking their eyes or ears, repeatedly hitting or patting themselves or an object, and sudden changes in vocal expression like getting much louder or quieter.)

Tips for preventing distress before it happens

- Provide the child with as much autonomy as possible (taking their age and abilities into account). This can look like unstructured time that they can spend doing whatever they want; being given choices around what to eat, where to go, what tasks to do, etc.; and listen to the child when they communicate that they want to leave a particular place or situation.
- Make sure the child knows what is going to happen – if there's a change to their routine coming, let them know as soon as possible and remind them often. Give the child images of what's going to happen (ideally photos), and go through the plan step by step.
- When you have control over the environment, make it as sensory-friendly as possible. (Our [Common triggers resource](#) can help identify potential sensory problems.)

- Give the child lots of breaks. If possible, have a quiet space set up in your house, school, or early childhood centre (whichever is relevant for you), that they can retreat to when they need to. For parents and caregivers, if you're out and about, let your child wait in the car (if it is safe to do so), hide in the bathroom, or take a break in another quiet space when necessary.
- Whenever possible, make sure there is a way for the child to get out of any situation – and you may find that just knowing they can escape if they need to makes them calmer and more likely to be able to tolerate the situation.

Managing distress in the moment

A child who is so upset that they are screaming, throwing things, or hurting themselves is incredibly distressing for the adults around them, and particularly for their parents. It's impossible to parent or care for a child perfectly when everyone in the room is upset and overwhelmed. The strategies listed below will help – but no one can do all of them perfectly every time, and no one should be expected to. Putting in as much effort as you can in the moment will still really help the child.

Some ways to manage a child's extreme distress while it's happening:

- Keep calm (as much as possible). Managing your own emotions when a child is kicking and screaming is incredibly difficult, but if you can appear calm it can help to calm the child as well.
- If you can immediately identify the source of the problem, either remove the problem or remove the child from the situation (whichever is easier).
- If the child is young enough to be carried and it's safe and appropriate to do so, remove them from the situation and get them to a calm, quiet space.

- If the child is too old or resists being carried, remove all demands on them. Don't ask or tell them to do anything, remove as much sensory stimulation as possible, and wait it out. As they starts to calm down, try giving them the option of leaving the situation and go with whatever they wants to do. In a school or ECE environment, remove other children to give the distressed child some space; at home, remove any siblings or pets from the room.
- This level of distress is exhausting for the child (and for you!). When it's over, let the child rest until they have recovered. This could mean being in a dark, quiet space; or it could mean playing together with something the child loves; or it could mean watching a show or movie they love. Some children will want comfort and company after a distressing episode; others will want to be left alone – it's important to respect the child's needs either way.