ASD Helping Hands

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Behaviour and Communication

Supporting children and young people in their behaviour and aiding communcition

Updated May 2025

Page of Contents

1. Introduction and Key Ideas

Behaviour is a form of communication. Every action tells us something — a feeling, a need, or a response to the environment. Behaviour management isn't about "fixing" children, but helping them feel safe, understood, and supported.

In this booklet, we explore why children with autism and ADHD might show certain behaviours, and how we as adults can support them through understanding and practical strategies. We look at how the brain processes emotion and stress, the different reasons behind behaviour, and how to recognise the early signs of a meltdown. We also cover the importance of parenting style, practical tools like the traffic light system, and proactive versus reactive strategies. You'll find tips for managing anger, understanding ADHD-related behaviours, and using restorative approaches to repair relationships after a behavioural incident.

This guide aims to empower parents, carers, and professionals with the knowledge to respond calmly, support emotional regulation, and help young people learn better ways to express their needs.

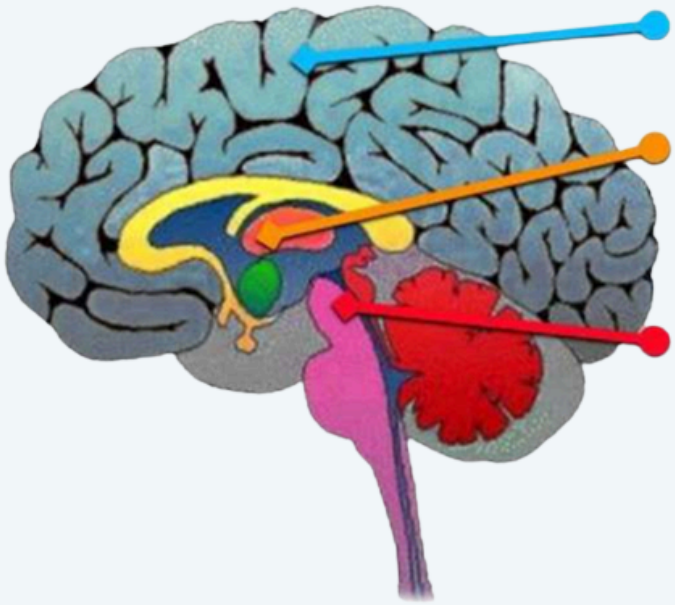
> ***All Behaviour is Communication***

Things to Remember:

- Nobody is perfect — even professionals make mistakes.
- Every child is unique; what works for one might not work for another.
- Flexibility is key. Be consistent, but ready to adapt.
- Avoid focusing on labels — use what works.
- Don't take behaviour personally. Stay calm and don't fuel the fire.
- Avoid deep discussions during a meltdown — save those for calmer times.
- Praise more, punish less.

2. The Brain and Behaviour

Behaviour is influenced by how the brain processes stress, emotion, and sensory input. Understanding how the brain functions can help us better support children when they are struggling to regulate their behaviour.
There are three main areas of the brain involved in behavioural responses:



Neo Cortex
Rational or Thinking Brains

Limbic Brain
Emotional or Feeling Brain

Reptilian Brain
Instinctual or Dinosaur Brain

Reptilian Brain
(Survival Brain)

Neo Cortex (Thinking Brain)

This is the most developed part of the brain, responsible for logical thinking, empathy, problem-solving, and self-awareness. It helps us to plan, reflect, and respond in socially appropriate ways. When a child is calm and regulated, they are more likely to be using this part of the brain.

Limbic System (Emotioanl Brain)

This part of the brain handles emotional responses. It triggers strong emotions like fear, joy, anger, and attachment. When emotions are high, the limbic system becomes more active, and it can override rational thought, especially in children with autism or ADHD.

This is the most primitive part of the brain. It controls automatic survival responses like fight, flight, or freeze, as well as basic functions like breathing and heart rate. When a child feels unsafe or overwhelmed, this part of the brain can take over.

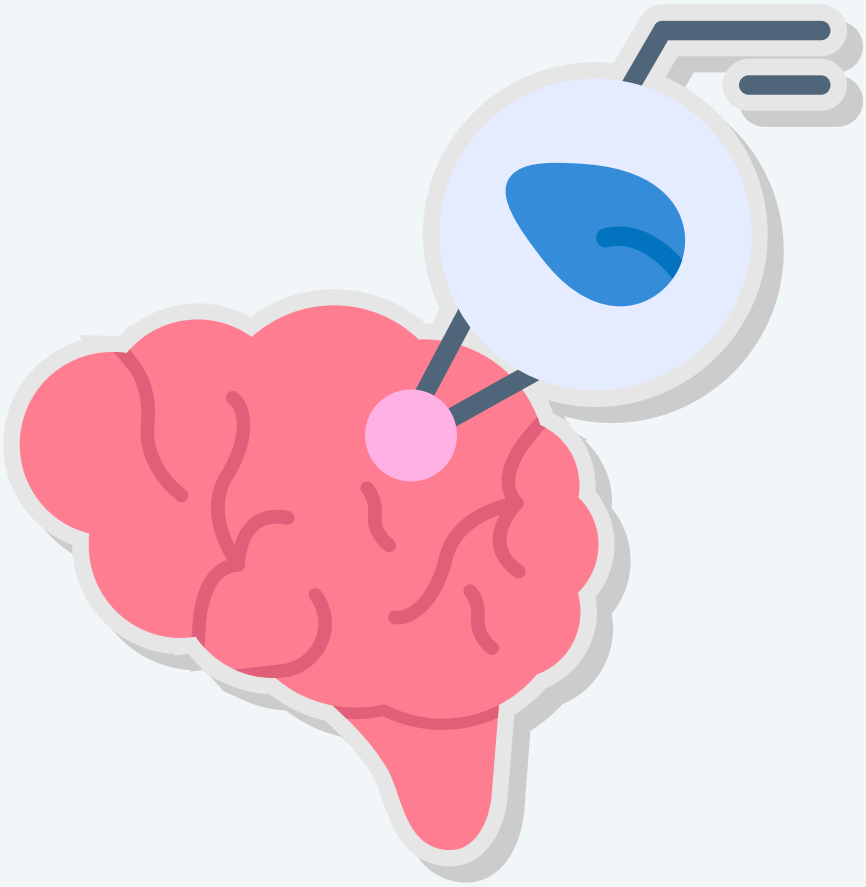
Amygdala: The Brain's Alarm System

The amygdala sits within the limbic system and acts like an internal alarm. It detects perceived threats and sends a distress signal, preparing the body to respond. This is useful in emergencies — but in children who are highly sensitive or have experienced trauma, the amygdala can become overactive.

When this happens, it causes what's known as an Amygdala Hijack. The thinking brain shuts down and the survival brain takes over. The child may become aggressive, panicked, shut down, or lash out. They aren't being "naughty" — they're overwhelmed and unable to regulate their response.

It usually takes around 18 minutes for the brain to begin calming after an amygdala hijack. However, stress hormones like cortisol can linger for several hours, meaning the child may remain emotionally sensitive long after the meltdown has passed.

Understanding these brain responses helps us approach behaviour with empathy and patience — and respond in ways that help the child feel safe and supported.



3. Understanding Why Behaviour Happens

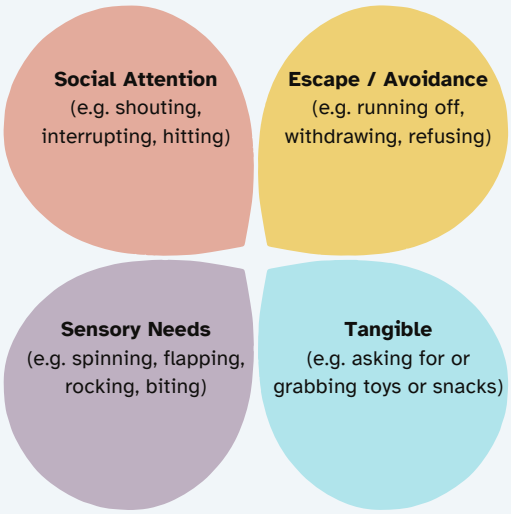
Children and young people with autism or ADHD may struggle with emotional regulation, communication, or sensory processing. As a result, their behaviour may look unusual or challenging to others — but it usually serves a purpose. Understanding why behaviour is happening can help adults respond with compassion and effectiveness.

Behaviour may be:

- A way to express unmet needs or emotions
- A reaction to anxiety, frustration, or change
- A response to overwhelming sensory input
- A learned behaviour that has worked in the past
- A signal that something doesn't feel right

The Four Functions of Behaviour

When a child shows challenging or unusual behaviour, it's often because the behaviour is serving a purpose — it's helping them meet a need. These needs usually fall into one of four categories, known as the functions of behaviour:



1. Attention

The child may behave in a certain way to gain attention from others — whether positive or negative. For example, shouting, interrupting, or even misbehaving might be their way of saying, "Look at me" or "I need help."

2. Escape or Avoidance

Some behaviours are used to get out of a situation that feels difficult, scary, or overwhelming — like refusing to do a task, running away, or withdrawing. This often happens when a child is anxious, confused, or overstimulated.

3. Access to Tangible Items

The child might want something they can't get easily — such as a toy, food, or electronic device. Instead of asking directly (which might be hard for them), they may grab, shout, or act out to get what they want.

4. Sensory Needs

Many children, especially those with autism or ADHD, have unique sensory preferences. Behaviour such as rocking, spinning, biting, or flapping may help them regulate how their body feels — either calming down or "waking up" their senses.

Why this matters:

All behaviour has meaning — even if it's not always obvious. Children are rarely "just being naughty."

Examples:

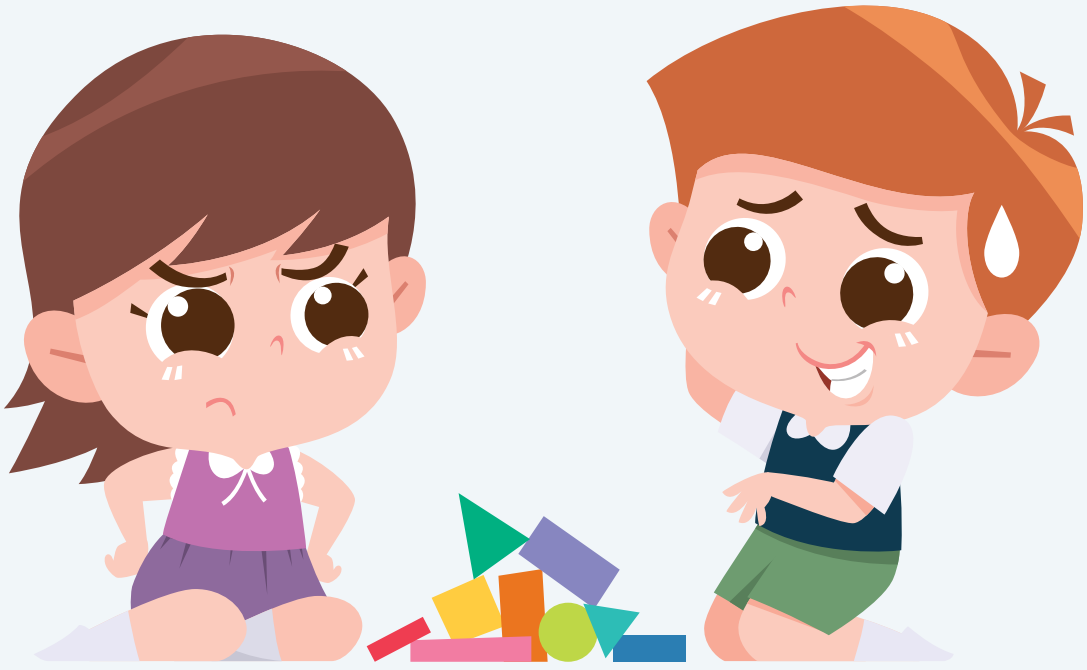
- A child who is shouting may be asking for help or expressing confusion.
- A meltdown may be caused by unexpected changes or feeling overwhelmed.
- A child who refuses to do something may be afraid of failure, confused by the instructions, or trying to avoid sensory discomfort.

Important to note:

- Some behaviours are "masked" at school, only to be released at home.
- Autistic children may not show stress in expected ways — smiles, quietness or shutdown can also be signs of distress.

By understanding what drives behaviour, we can support the child to express themselves in safer, more effective ways.

Key Point: Behaviour is not always a choice — it may be a reaction the child can't control. Our role is to look beneath the surface and respond supportively.



4. Parenting and Behaviour: What to Know

Your parenting style matters. Children thrive when adults provide both structure and warmth. An authoritative approach — one that is firm but fair, consistent yet compassionate — offers children the guidance they need while also

Common Parenting Styles

1 Authoritarian

Strict and controlling, often with little emotional support. This may lead to fear or resentment.

2 Permissive

Kind and accepting, but lacking clear boundaries or consequences. Children may struggle with self-control.

3 Authoritative

A balanced approach. Parents set clear rules and expectations, while also showing empathy, encouragement, and understanding.

4 Uninvolved

characterised by low warmth and low control. These parents may provide basic needs like food and shelter but are generally disengaged from the child's emotional, social, or behavioural development.

Why this matters:

Children with autism or ADHD often need more structure, clearer communication, and greater emotional support than their peers. Parenting style can influence how they cope with stress, manage emotions, and respond to boundaries.

Tips for Effective Parenting:

- **Know your triggers:** Recognise what pushes your buttons and plan calming responses.
- **Manage emotional flooding:** When stress is high, take a break. Arguments are rarely helpful in the heat of the moment.
- **Model calmness**: Children often mirror our emotions. A calm adult helps regulate a distressed child.
- **Use consistent language:** Repetition and predictability reduce anxiety.
- **Avoid power struggles:** Pick your battles and use praise to encourage the behaviours you want to see more of.

Emotional Flooding

Emotional flooding and why it matters: Emotional flooding happens when a person's brain and body become overwhelmed by strong emotions like anger, fear, or frustration. In that moment, the logical part of the brain (the neocortex) shuts down, and the emotional or survival parts take over. This can happen to both adults and children.

For adults, this may show up as shouting, shutting down, or saying things we later regret. For children — especially those with autism or ADHD — it can result in meltdowns, aggression, or running away. It's important to recognise when you or your child are emotionally flooded so that you can pause and take steps to calm down before trying to talk or discipline.

How to manage flooding:

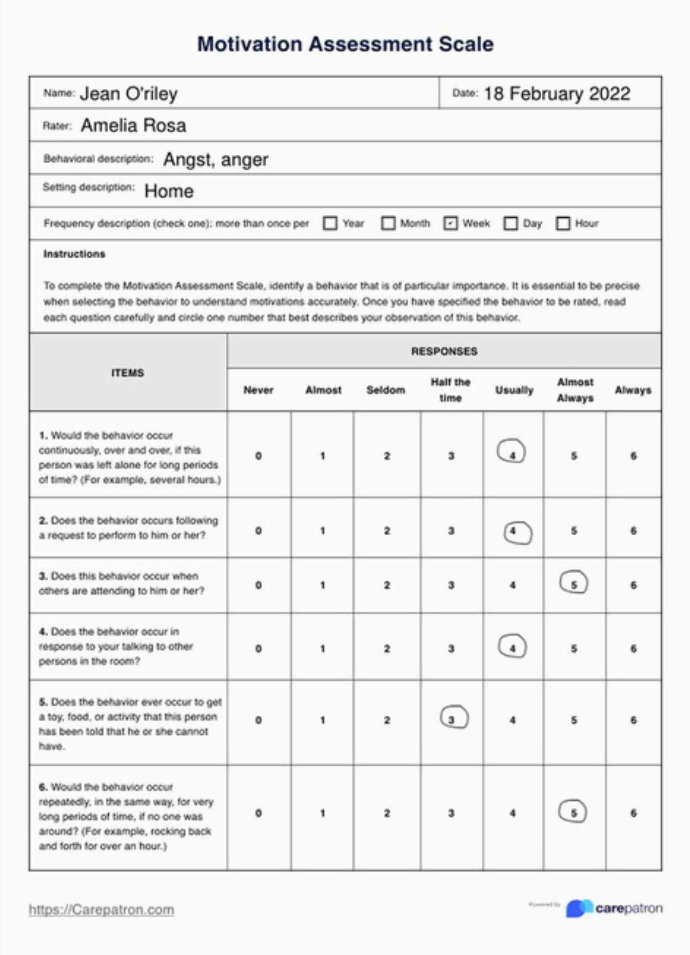
- Take deep breaths or step away from the situation.
- Avoid reasoning or correcting during a meltdown.
- Use calming phrases or visuals.
- Revisit the issue later, when everyone is calm.
- By recognising and responding to emotional flooding early, we help prevent situations from escalating and model healthy emotional regulation.

5. Tracking and Understadning Behaviour

Understanding what drives a behaviour is key to supporting a child effectively. Two helpful tools that can support this are Motivational Assessment Scales and A-B-C Behaviour Charts.

Motivational Assessment Scales (MAS) These are questionnaires completed by parents, carers, or school staff to help identify the function of a specific behaviour — for example, whether it happens to gain attention, avoid something, get something, or meet a sensory need.

The MAS guides adults to consider when the behaviour happens, what follows it, and what the possible triggers might be. This helps build a picture of what the behaviour might be trying to communicate.
Example: If a child consistently throws objects when asked to do written work, MAS might reveal the function is escape — the child is avoiding an activity they find difficult or stressful.



Motivation Assessment Scale

Name: Jean O'riley | Date: 18 February 2022

Rater: Amelia Rosa

Behavioral description: Angst, anger

Setting description: Home

Frequency description (check one): more than once per ☐ Year ☐ Month ☑ Week ☐ Day ☐ Hour

Instructions

To complete the Motivation Assessment Scale, identify a behavior that is of particular importance. It is essential to be precise when selecting the behavior to understand motivations accurately. Once you have specified the behavior to be rated, read each question carefully and circle one number that best describes your observation of this behavior.

ITEMS	RESPONSES						
	Never	Almost	Seldom	Half the time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
1. Would the behavior occur continuously, over and over, if this person was left alone for long periods of time? (For example, several hours.)	0	1	2	3	(4)	5	6
2. Does the behavior occurs following a request to perform to him or her?	0	1	2	3	(4)	5	6
3. Does this behavior occur when others are attending to him or her?	0	1	2	3	4	(5)	6
4. Does the behavior occur in response to your talking to other persons in the room?	0	1	2	3	(4)	5	6
5. Does the behavior ever occur to get a toy, food, or activity that this person has been told that he or she cannot have.	0	1	2	(3)	4	5	6
6. Would the behavior occur repeatedly, in the same way, for very long periods of time, if no one was around? (For example, rocking back and forth for over an hour.)	0	1	2	3	4	(5)	6

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Example fo a MAS Assessment

ABC Charts

A-B-C Behaviour Charts A-B-C stands for Antecedent, Behaviour, and Consequence:

- A (Antecedent): What happened just before the behaviour?
- B (Behaviour): What exactly did the child do?
- C (Consequence): What happened afterwards?

Tracking behaviour this way helps spot patterns and identify triggers. It also highlights which consequences might reinforce the behaviour (even unintentionally).

Example:

- A: The Child asked to tidy up
- B: Screamed and threw toys
- C: The Adult removed the toys and let the child leave the room

This may suggest that the behaviour helped the child avoid tidying and unintentionally reinforced the screaming. With this insight, adults can adapt their approach.

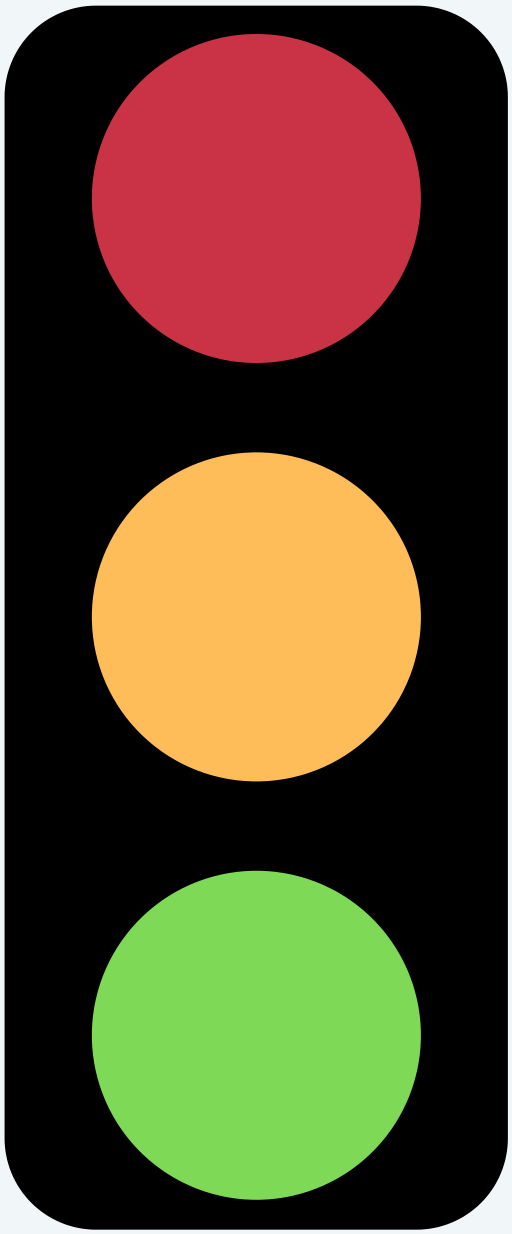
A (Antecedent) What happened just before the behaviour?	**B (Behaviour)** What exactly did the child do?	**C (Consequence)** What happened afterwards?
Child asked to tidy up	Screamed and threw toys	Adult removed toys and let child leave the room

Example of an ABC Chart

These are typically done over a period of time to notice trends in behaviours

The Traffic Light System

This simple yet effective model helps adults recognise changes in a child's behaviour and intervene early. It divides behaviour into three coloured stages, just like a traffic light:



Red – Meltdown or Crisis
At this point, the child has become overwhelmed and may lose the ability to think rationally or respond to instruction. They are in survival mode. You may observe:

- Shouting, hitting, running away, or shutting down
- Crying, screaming, or self-injurious behaviour
- Resistance to any form of verbal reasoning

Amber – Signs of Escalation
The child is starting to feel stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed. The signs can be subtle but recognising them early can help prevent a meltdown. You may notice:

- Pacing, fidgeting, nail-biting
- Becoming withdrawn or overly silly
- Changes in voice tone or body language
- More controlling or repetitive behaviours

Green – Calm and Ready to Learn
At this stage, the child is relaxed, engaged, and receptive. This is the best time to teach new skills, build relationships, and reinforce positive behaviours. You may notice:
Smiling, laughing, or engaging with others
Focused on activities or routines
Following instructions with ease

There are many ways to implement this but we suggest the simple approach of using coloured cards so that the child / young person can indicate when they may be struggling.

6. Positive Behaviour Strategies

When looking at strategies to implement to support communication and behaviour, we ned to split these into 3 distinct types as the effectiveness of a strategy depends on when it is used.

- Proactive Strategies
- Active Strategies
- Reactive Strategies

Pro-Active

Proactive strategies produce long-term behaviour changes However, they are slow-burning. Proactive strategies are intended to make sure the person has what they need and want on a
on a day-to-day basis, and also includes ways to teach the person appropriate communication and life skills

Best used when someone is in the Green Phase of the Traffic Light System

Active

Active strategies are used when a person is beginning to become overwhelmed. This could be down to many factors such as enviroment, sensory issues, social pressures, delayed processing. Their aim is reduce the stress to prevent the need for more reactive or restrictive practices.

Best used when someone is in the Amber Phase of the Traffic Light System

Reactive

Reactive strategies are quick but not long-lasting. Reactive strategies are designed to keep the person and those
around them safe from harm. They provide a way to react quickly in a situation where the person is distressed or anxious and more likely to display challenging behaviour.

Best used when someone is in the Red Phase of the Traffic Light System

We can also think of these strategies as Red, Amber and Green

Proactive

The aim is to try and support the person to stay in this phase as musch as possible. it is important to think about what helps keep the person to feel calm and realxed.

- **Visual schedules**
- **Clear routines**
- **Preferred activities**
- **Calm, clutter-free environment**
- **Teaching emotional language**

Active

At this stage, the person may start to become anxious, frustrated or distressed. They will start displaying signs such as pacing, stimming,or displaying uncharatisitc reactions.

- **Remove or reduce the trigger**
- **Offer choices**
- **Use humour or distraction**
- **Use short phrases: “First... then...”**
- **Redirect calmly**
- **Use visuals and social stories**

Reactive

At this stage, challenging behaviours begin to occur and we need to help the person to de-esculate themselves to prevent distress and/or injury.

- **Stay calm and non-confrontational**
- **Reduce sensory input**
- **Speak clearly and slowly**
- **Avoid crowding or over-talking**
- **Prioritise safety**

The type of strategy you use, how you implement it and at what stage, will depend greatly on the person you are trying to support. Therefore, it is very difficult to say what will and won’t work, try to keep an open mind and work with the person so that they take the lead as they will know what is best for them.

7. Heigthend Emotional States : Recovery and Repair

After a child experiences a meltdown or highly emotional state, what happens next is just as important as the support during the event itself. The recovery and repair process helps restore a sense of safety, rebuild trust, and lay the groundwork to reduce future incidents.

This section explores:

- The S.C.A.R.E.D. approach — a structured and compassionate framework for supporting children during and after meltdowns.
- The importance of recovery time — giving children space and reassurance without rushing them.
- How to use restorative conversations to reconnect and reflect once the child is calm.
- Ways to reinforce positive behaviours and prepare for similar situations in the future.

S.C.A.R.E.D.approach

The S.C.A.R.E.D. approach is a structured method designed to support children during and after a meltdown. Originally developed for use with autistic children and those with sensory or emotional regulation difficulties, it helps adults stay calm, maintain safety, and guide the child through the experience with empathy and clarity.

Each letter stands for a core principle:

S-Safe
C-Calm
A- Affirmation
R-Routine
E-Empathy
D-Develop

The S.C.A.R.E.D. approach promotes safety, empathy, and connection. It shifts the focus from controlling behaviour to supporting emotional recovery — which in turn helps reduce the frequency and intensity of future meltdowns.

S — SAFE

The first priority is to create a safe space, free from overwhelming stimuli and potential dangers. The child's brain is in survival mode, so your goal is to minimise threats.

- Move to a quieter environment if possible.
- Remove sharp objects or crowding.
- Don't leave the child alone, but maintain respectful distance.
- Avoid restraint unless absolutely necessary for safety.

C — Calm

Children look to adults for emotional regulation. If we stay calm, it helps them begin to regulate again.

- Use a soft, clear, and steady voice.
- Avoid shouting or emotional reactions.
- Keep your own body language neutral and open.
- Speak in short, literal sentences.

A — Affirmation

Acknowledge that the child is doing the best they can with the tools they have.

- Use their name and validate their feelings: "I can see this is really hard for you."
- Avoid blaming, questioning, or demanding explanations.
- Let them know you are there to help, not punish.

R — Routine

Routine is grounding. It helps the child regain a sense of control.

- Reflect familiar actions or words.
- Allow harmless repetitive behaviours (e.g. pacing, scripting).
- Use visual supports or schedules if available.
- Reintroduce structure gently once the child begins to calm.

E — Empathy

Try to see the situation from the child's point of view.

- Acknowledge how overwhelmed they may feel.
- Use kind body language, eye contact if tolerated, and gentle tone.
- Reassure the child they are not in trouble.

D — Develop

After the meltdown, help the child build tools and strategies for the future.

- When calm, talk about what happened and what might help next time.
- Work together on a simple plan or script.
- Involve school or carers for consistency.

The Restorative Approach

Restorative practices offer a respectful and empathetic way to address challenging incidents after they happen.

Instead of punishing or assigning blame, the focus is on repairing harm, restoring relationships, and helping the child understand the impact of their actions.

Key restorative questions include:

- What happened?
- How were you feeling at the time?
- How do you think others felt?
- What could we do to make things better?
- What will we do differently next time?

Restorative conversations work best when everyone is calm and receptive. They help the child reflect, learn new strategies, and feel heard — without shame or fear. Over time, this process can build emotional maturity and reduce repeated behaviours.

Tips for using restorative approaches:

- Stay calm and non-judgemental
- Use simple, clear language
- Avoid “why” questions that can feel blaming
- Focus on understanding and moving forward

These approaches build trust, promote self-awareness, and help create a consistent, supportive environment where children feel empowered to do better.

8. Supporting Children and Young People with Anger

Anger is a normal emotion — but for some children, especially those with autism or ADHD, it can be overwhelming and difficult to manage. What may start as frustration or anxiety can quickly escalate into shouting, hitting, or shutting down. Helping children understand and cope with anger requires patience, teaching, and support over time.

Why children might struggle with anger:

- They feel misunderstood or unheard
- They struggle to express themselves verbally
- They are masking anxiety or fear
- They are reacting to sensory overload
- They don’t have effective coping strategies yet
- They are dealing with social confusion, rejection, or bullying

Recognising the signs of building anger:

There are many signs that a young person may be becoming Angry or expirencing frsiytration. Some fo the msot common signs are below:

- Tense body language (clenched fists, pacing, red face)
- Increased volume or tone of voice
- Repetitive speech or stimming
- Complaints of feeling hot or unwell
- Withdrawal, refusal, or becoming overly silly

Tips for Supporting Children with Anger:

Teach about emotions proactively

- Don’t wait until a child is angry to talk about anger. Teach emotional vocabulary when they are calm:
- Use emotion cards or books to label feelings
- Talk about characters’ feelings in stories or TV shows
- Model how to talk about your own feelings (“I feel frustrated, so I’m taking deep breaths.”)

Use visual tools and stories

- Books like The Red Beast, The Panicosaurus, and The Disappointment Dragon help children understand that emotions are normal and manageable.
- Create an “anger plan” with steps they can follow
- Use the Incredible 5-Point Scale to help them rate how they feel

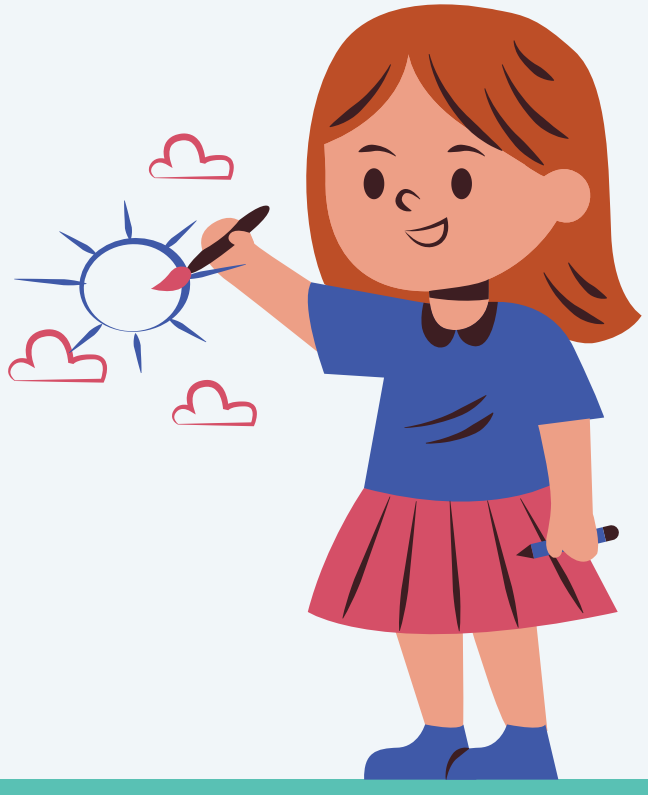
Create a calm-down strategy

Every child’s calming tools will be different. Support them to discover what works:

- Sensory aids (fidget toys, chewy necklaces, noise-cancelling headphones)
- Movement (jumping on a trampoline, running, squeezing a pillow)
- Visuals (calm corner, glitter jar, visual timer)
- Breathing exercises or mindfulness apps

Role-play and rehearse

When calm, practise what to do when anger starts to rise. Try role-playing familiar frustrating situations with alternative reactions. Make it playful but meaningful.



Stay calm and predictable
Children in distress need an adult who is in control of their own emotions. Speak in a low tone, move slowly, and avoid sarcasm or shouting. Predictability helps reduce anxiety.

Stay calm and predictable
Children in distress need an adult who is in control of their own emotions. Speak in a low tone, move slowly, and avoid sarcasm or shouting. Predictability helps reduce anxiety.

Don’t punish the emotion
Focus on teaching safer expressions of anger, rather than punishing the anger itself. Help them repair any harm afterwards with guidance and support.

Example scenario:

- Child gets angry when losing a game and throws the board.
  - Later, talk about what happened using emotion cards.
  - Practise using words to say “I need a break” instead of throwing.
  - Help them put the game away as a form of restoring, not punishment.

What not to do:

What not to do:

- Don’t say “calm down” without showing them how
- Don’t dismiss or ignore their feelings
- Don’t try to reason when they are fully dysregulated
- Don’t punish with isolation, especially if that’s already a trigger

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Supporting children with anger isn’t about removing the emotion — it’s about teaching safer, more constructive ways to express it. With time, consistency, and emotional safety, children can learn to understand their own signals and choose strategies that work for them.

9. ADHD and Behaviour

Children and young people with ADHD often experience differences in attention, impulse control, and activity levels. These differences can affect how they learn, socialise, and respond to daily routines — not because they want to behave badly, but because their brains process information and regulate attention differently.

In this section, we'll explore ADHD-specific behavioural challenges not already covered in this booklet, and offer practical tips for support.

Common ADHD-related Behavioural Characteristics

- **Hyperfocus**: While often thought of as distractible, children with ADHD can also become intensely focused on something they enjoy — losing track of time or surroundings.
- **Task initiation difficulties**: Getting started on activities (especially non-preferred ones) may be extremely hard. It's not laziness — it's about how the brain manages motivation and transitions.
- **Emotional impulsivity**: Children may react with sudden outbursts of frustration or excitement, often struggling to regulate emotions in the moment.
- **Difficulty following multi-step instructions**: They may forget partway through or get stuck without knowing how to ask for help.

Remember: Children with ADHD are not being defiant — they're working with a brain that needs structure, movement, and support to stay on track. Small changes in how we present tasks, transitions, and expectations can lead to big improvements in behaviour and self-esteem.

Strategies to Support ADHD-specific Behavioural Needs:

1 Break tasks into micro-steps

- Give one instruction at a time, or present checklists with just 2–3 steps.
- For example: “First put your book away. Then get your shoes.”
- Use timers or visual cues to prompt the next step.

2 Use external motivators appropriately

- Motivation can fluctuate quickly. Offer immediate, small incentives for completion — even verbal praise or a sticker chart.
- Avoid punishment for lack of follow-through — instead, guide them back with prompts and encouragement.

3 Transition support

- Use countdowns, visual timers, or a “now, next, later” board to make transitions predictable.
- Try: “In 5 minutes we’re tidying up. What do you want to do before then?”

4 Movement and sensory regulation

- Encourage standing desks, fidget items, or walking between tasks.
- Incorporate movement breaks every 20–30 minutes, especially during learning or structured activities.

5 Build self-awareness of energy levels

- Use colour-coded scales or “body check-ins” to help the child reflect: Am I too wiggly? Am I tired? Am I ready to focus?
- Help them identify when they might need a break or sensory input.

6 Support with time perception

- Many children with ADHD struggle to sense time passing. Try:
  - Using sand timers or digital clocks with alarms
  - Colour-coded schedules
  - Alarms with verbal cues (“Time to pack away!”)

10. Tools and Resources

Recommended Tools:

- A-B-C Behaviour Charts
- Incredible 5-Point Scale
- Social Stories
- Visual Schedules
- Sensory Screening (ASD Helping Hands)
- Behaviour Support Plans

Books and Resources

- The Red Beast – Managing Anger
- The Panicosaurus – Understanding Anxiety
- The Disappointment Dragon – Coping with Letdowns

Websites

- www.autism.org.uk
- www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk
- www.5pointscale.com
- www.asdhelpinghands.org.uk

ASD Helping Hands

Our Mission

“Empowering autistic individuals and those around them, ASD Helping Hands is dedicated to fostering confidence, independence, and inclusion at every stage of life. We provide guidance, education, and resources to help individuals, families, and professionals navigate autism with knowledge and empowerment.

We champion the rights of autistic people, striving to create a more inclusive society while ensuring our services remain accessible, reliable, and built on trust.”

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