



# Early Childhood- Obsessions and Inflexibility



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## **Making transition times easier**

*“Jackson often has a tantrum when it’s time to pack up the activities and sit on the mat.”*

### **Why does this happen?**

- Children with autism have a very strong motivation to do what they want to do, not what they have been asked to do. Once they start an activity they may have a compulsive desire to finish it through to completion.
- Changes in routine threaten the child’s sense of security and comfort; this can cause great anxiety. Children with autism are very frightened by the uncertainty of not being able to anticipate what will happen next.
- Moving through a group of children in a noisy room to the next activity may cause anxiety for children with autism.
- The child with autism may not know where to go next or what to do at the end of an activity.

### **What you can do**

- Give the child a transition cue – the cue could be an object, a hand sign such as finished or a picture card with finished on it.
- Give the child transition time - Use a timer to indicate how long until the child must move to the next activity, i.e. set the timer for 5 minutes, when the bell goes of the child knows its time to move.
- When in the community if moving from one place to another, indicate a few minutes prior to arrival where you are going and what you will do there. We will go to the zoo and we will see some animals and eat lunch. The child will be more relaxed if he knows what’s coming next. Again give the child time to move from one place to another- the bus to the venue.
- Allow the child to move from one activity to the next either first or last to avoid a chaotic situation with a large group of children, or move smaller groups at a time.
- Indicate to the child where you would like them to move to next, “Jackson, time to wash hands. Line up at the front of the line”.
- The child may be more willing to leave an activity if you reassure him that he can return to it after group time. Be specific about when the child can complete the activity, “lunch, then trains”. Avoid using vague terms like ‘later’. Don’t use this technique just to get the child’s co-operation – you must reward him by allowing him to return to the activity, even if only for a short while.
- Use a visual timetable that clearly shows the order of activities. You can download pictures of activities on the Visual aids page.
- If you think the child is having a tantrum to avoid group time, see also Social Interaction > Sitting in groups.

### **Insistence on rules**

*“Jordan tells the other children off whenever they do something wrong. He can be quite rude about it.”*

### **Why does this happen?**

Children with autism have a strong need to control their environment. They rely on rules and routines to give their life structure and make it predictable. This can be an advantage, as rules can be used in a positive way to promote good behaviour. However, a child with autism may not understand that it is inappropriate to tell an adult every time someone does something wrong.

Sometimes, the child with autism may develop their own set of rules or firmly-held beliefs. They may become very upset when other children do not play or act according to their rules.

Deficits in language skills can result in the child with autism mimicking the language of adults. The child may even copy the adult's tone of voice and speech patterns. A lack of social awareness means the child with autism may tell others off much like an adult would scold a child.

### **What you can do**

If the child is constantly 'telling on' other children, he needs to be taught when it is appropriate to seek adult help. For example, you might tell him he can call an adult if another child is hurt or in physical danger, but not for name-calling. Alternately, place a limit on the number of times the child can tell an adult about rule infringements, say 5 times per session. Draw ticks on a wall chart so that the child can see when he has reached his limit.

Social stories about rules, why others break the rules and telling on people may be useful. Social stories can be tailored to the individual child's situation.

### **Insistence on routine**

*“Every morning when Dylan arrives, he goes straight to the blocks. He insists on making three trains before he’ll do any other activity. Nothing that we say or do changes this behaviour.”*

### **Why does this happen?**

- Children with autism have a very strong need for routine. This may be caused by their difficulty in predicting future events and anxiety about ‘what happens next’.
- Some children may insist on things happening in a certain order. Order gives them a sense of comfort and makes them feel secure. Any changes in routine threaten this sense of security and may cause anxiety.
- Some children with autism have a very strong desire to complete a task that they have started. The behaviour may be compulsive. They may stubbornly insist on completing the task, refusing to do anything else. Requests for the child to move on to something else may make the child very upset and anxious, and even less likely to co-operate.
- Children with autism can become very anxious or upset when transitioning from one activity to the next if they are in the middle of a preferred activity, this can lead to behaviours of concern or tantrum like behaviour.
- Children with autism have difficulty with sequencing of events. They may be reluctant to try new activities, especially if they do not understand what is expected of them.
- Many children with autism are perfectionists. They may carefully repeat a task over and over until they are satisfied with the result.

### **What you can do**

- Firstly, decide whether it is necessary to change the child’s routine behaviour. If the routine doesn’t interfere with your daily program or harm anybody else it may best to wait and see if it disappears over time.
- If it is necessary to change the behaviour, you will first need to change the environment. This may mean taking the blocks away temporarily or changing the sequence of events, ie. start the program with outdoor activities or a song.
- A gentler approach may be to gradually introduce small changes into the child’s routine. Use a kitchen timer to show the child how much time is remaining until the task is completed.
- Give the child a transition cue to warn them a new task or activity is coming and some time to finish what they are doing and move to the next task, “finish blocks now, outside time next”. Some children with autism may need the sign for finish or a picture cue.

- The child may be more willing to leave the task if he is reassured that he can return to it later.
- It may help to show the child a visual timetable so that he knows when he is able to return to the activity.
- If the routine is comprised of a number of steps, encourage the child to skip some of these steps. It is a good idea to introduce slight variations to activities to help the child become more tolerant of change.
- Redirect the interest in trains (or whatever the obsession may be) into other activities. Encourage the child to draw or paint a train, or look at books about trains rather than build a train of blocks.
- Try using a visual timetable. the child may be overwhelmed by the number of activities available. It may help if he is able to choose activities from picture cards, placing them on an activity strip. As each task is completed he can post the cards into a special post box. You can download picture cards by going to the Visual aids page.

### **Insistence on preferred activities**

*“Brandon spends so much of his time playing with trains. He won’t draw, paint or do puzzles. He doesn’t want to try anything else.”*

### **Why does this happen?**

- Most children with autism have an obsessive interest; their play is often solitary and restricted by deficits in their imagination. This affects their ability to engage in pretend play.
- Children with autism enjoy doing the same things over and over because predictability and routine makes them feel safe and secure. They also have a very strong fear of failure; they may need more encouragement and reassurance than other children.
- Some children avoid certain activities because of sensory processing difficulties. They can have an intense dislike of noisy or ‘messy’ activities, eg. i.e touching paste, paint or play dough.
- Children with autism have little motivation to please others because they are unable to understand the thoughts and perspectives of other people. They may not be interested in pleasing another person. They do not understand why they should do something they do not wish to do. Children with autism are only interested in what is important to them

### **What you can do**

- Encourage the child to choose activities by giving him picture choice cards. These cards are very helpful for any child who has difficulty choosing activities and moving from one task to another. You can download common images from the Visual aids page.
- At first, choose one new activity for the child and allow the child to choose the remainder. Give time at his preferred activity as a reward for trying something new.
- Try to use the child’s obsession in a positive way, i.e. encourage the child to paint or draw his obsessive interest, look at books on the subject, etc,
- Have an occupational therapist perform an assessment and sensory profile to check if there are any sensory issues that make the child reluctant to try new activities.
- Find out what motivates the child and offer them an appropriate rewards for trying a new activity. i.e. a train sticker if the child likes trains. See Using praise and rewards for more information.

### **Coping with room changes**

*“When Aden returned from holidays, he was really upset and anxious because had re-arranged the room during the break.”*

### **Why does this happen?**

- The physical layout and structure of a room is important to people with autism. Placement of objects in a room gives the person with autism a physical point of reference in the environment and provides a feeling of safety.
- Changing or removing of items in a room can be disorientating and cause anxiety.
- Children with autism have a strong need for routine. Changes in their routine can cause great anxiety. A child with autism may be able to accept a major change like going on holiday, but have great difficulty coping with small changes, such as a room being re-arranged.
- Many children with autism have very good visual memories. They may notice very subtle changes to their environment.

### **What you can do**

- Re define the child's space in the room – provide a defined space on the mat for the child to sit and a defined space at the snack table.
- Ensure the space on the mat is close to the front to ensure the child has a better chance of paying attention.
- Space for the child at the Snack table needs to be at the end of the table where fewer children are touching the child with autism, as children with autism can feel uncomfortable about eating if they are too close to other children.
- Ensure the child has a defined safe area or quiet space and show the child the area. It is important for the child to know where the area is in the room so they can access the safe space without becoming distressed if the area has changed.

### **When a staff member is absent**

*“When our assistant was away recently Laura got so upset that she refused to come inside.”*

### **Why does this happen?**

- It is common for children with autism to rely on routines. Any unexpected change to their routine can cause a major upset.
- Children with autism may not be overly affectionate towards staff but will recognise a particular staff person as being able to meet their needs. If that person is absent the child may become confused and upset not knowing who to go to for help

### **What you can do**

- Keep the same routine that would usually be followed during the day. Consistency will help the child predict in knowing what to expect next even if the staff member has changed.
- If staff plan on taking leave, give the child plenty of advance warning. Explain to her that everything else about her day will be the same; but her teacher will be different.
- To assist the relief teacher, make up an information page about the child with autism. Include a photo, likes and dislikes, any fears or phobias, obsessions, areas of difficulty etc.
- If a staff member is ill, have someone telephone the child’s mother on the day so that she can be prepared for the change in routine and any follow on effects at home. .
- Develop a photo board with staff pictures, name and the day. That way you can visually show the child who is working on the day, show a symbol for sick or on holidays next to the absent staff member. The child may be more relaxed if another staff member they recognise is working.

### **Using toys as objects**

*"I often see Tom playing with a car or truck, and he's just spinning the wheels over and over. He doesn't play like the other children."*

- Children with autism have impairments in their imagination; they frequently display a lack of creative play skills. Their interests may be limited, repetitive and solitary.
- The behaviour of children with autism is often repetitive, rigid and inflexible. They seem to have a narrow focus on small details of an object, as if they are unable to see the 'whole picture'.
- Children with autism may have difficulty ceasing behaviour that is repetitive or compulsive.
- Children with autism may use the toy or object as part of a self-stimulation routine rather than to play. I.e. tapping certain objects just to hear the noise it makes, mouthing or chewing toys for oral stimulation. Using toys or objects to flap, rustle or spin, rubbing toys on body parts for physical sensory stimulation.
- Children with autism do play, but often play is the acting out of what the child may have seen on a TV show starring their favourite character. Any deviation from the script by others will not be tolerated.
- Children with autism often prefer to play alone as interacting with others can be difficult.
- If the child with autism is playing with others they will often want to control the game and expect other children playing with them to conform.
- Children with autism often do not know how to ask others to play with them. They may take a toy or ball away from another child indicating they want to play or join in a game instead of asking.
- Children with autism may prefer to play alone as they often do not like people in close physical proximity.
- Often the child with autism will fear their toy may be taken away from them.
- Children with autism may lash out at others who are too close to them whilst they are playing with a favoured toy or object

### **What you can do**

- Teaching the child with autism to play is an important part of normal social and emotional development and is very important. It can take many years of modelling and teaching for the child with autism to learn how to play cooperatively
- The child may resist an adult or child joining in his play, but this will be necessary to expand interests and play skills. Observe the child's play and copy



what the child is doing. If the child always does the same thing, change it a little. Be enthusiastic - make new suggestions seem really exciting!

- Rather than asking questions, make comments about the child's play in order to expand interest in activities. "My car is going very fast!" "Your car is red."
- If the child's play seems obsessive or compulsive, give a clear, verbal message to stop. You can also use hand signals to reinforce this message. Redirect the child towards play that is interactive and imaginative.
- If the child is obsessively mouthing objects seek an occupational therapy assessment as an Occupational Therapist can provide you with strategies and sensory stimulation program to overcome these difficulties.
- See also Obsessive topics