

ASD Article – DEECD

The most common issue, for which I am invited to provide secondary consultation, is that of children with ASD displaying aggressive behaviours. This includes but is not limited to; hitting, punching, kicking, pushing others swearing, yelling and making threats to injure others.

Unfortunately there are no easy answers for managing any behaviour, however there are proactive strategies schools can use to minimise this kind of behaviour from students with ASD. The key to developing successful strategies is for teachers & carers to work together as a **team** to identify what causes the behaviour (trigger) and what the behaviour achieves for the child (function). Once aware of the triggers and the function of the behaviour it is then possible as a team to develop proactive strategies to reduce the frequency of the behaviour.

Some things which might lead to aggressive outbursts from children with ASD include (in no particular order);

- **Avoidance or Escape** – aggression is a very effective strategy for avoiding or escaping difficult or stressful situations or tasks. It is important to encourage appropriate ways for a child to have a break if overwhelmed – when calm encourage the child to return and reward the appropriate response. *Possible Actions – look for early signs of stress and redirect the child to a calm area before a ‘meltdown’, use incentive programs to encourage the child to use the appropriate response.*
- **Confusion/Frustration** – communication difficulties often lead to frustration and confusion which may be expressed as anger. People with ASD are literal thinkers and communicators. Sayings such as “wait a minute” may result in the child becoming distressed or angry if you do not respond in a “minute” – this is not an attempt to be difficult but is simply a result of the child’s literal interpretation of your communication. *Possible Action - Review communication strategies, including use of visual tools, and beware that all people with ASD are very literal in their understanding.*
- **High anxiety** – anxiety goes hand in hand with ASD! Remember you are dealing with highly stressed children for whom it is often a challenge just to get to school each day! The playground is particularly stressful – loud, social, with no routine or order. *Possible Action – consider all things which could increase the anxiety for the individual and identify how to reduce the impact of each, consider playground strategies such as lunchtime clubs etc, monitor the child’s anxiety levels.*
- **Changes in routine** – Children with ASD rely on routine for predictability, without this they often become anxious increasing the risk of aggressive outbursts. *Possible Action - prepare the child where possible, communicate your understanding of how difficult the change is and most importantly confirm what to expect throughout the rest of the day. Be prepared for lots of repeated questions, provide visual communication for reinforcement.*
- **Impaired Theory of Mind** – Children with ASD have significant difficulty ‘reading’ others therefore their understanding of the intent of others is generally poor. This can lead to a child responding violently when accidentally bumped in the yard, because they assume they were bumped on purpose. *Possible Actions – social skills training, develop social stories with the child.*

Please note this brief article was written at the request of DEECD (SMR) for inclusion in their ASD newsletter that is distributed to all schools each term. The information included here is a guide only.

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