



*Together for Neurodiversity*

Empowering Futures, Embracing Differences

# Strategies for Supporting Autistic Children and Young People

# Introduction

Every autistic child is unique—with their own interests, strengths, needs, and ways of experiencing the world. At Together for Neurodiversity, we believe that with the right understanding and support, autistic children and young people can feel safe, valued, and empowered to be their authentic selves. This booklet is designed to help parents and carers build a toolkit of practical strategies and supports that create a more predictable, inclusive, and nurturing environment—whether at home, school, or out in the community.

These pages offer practical, easy-to-understand explanations of key tools and approaches. Each section includes:

- What the strategy is
- Why it's useful
- How to implement it at home or in everyday life

No strategy is one-size-fits-all—feel free to adapt these ideas to suit your child's needs and preferences.

# ABC Model

## **What it is:**

A simple way to understand behaviour by looking at what happens before (Antecedent), the behaviour itself (Behaviour), and what happens after (Consequence).

## **Why it's useful:**

The ABC model helps identify triggers and patterns in behaviour. By understanding these, you can better support your child, prevent challenging behaviour, and encourage positive responses.

## **How to implement it:**

- Antecedent: Notice what happens right before the behaviour. Is your child asked to do something difficult? Is there a loud noise or a change in routine?
- Behaviour: Describe the behaviour clearly and without judgement (e.g., “child covers ears,” “child runs away,” “child shouts”).
- Consequence: Look at what happens immediately after. Does the child get a break, attention, or a warning? How do adults and others respond?

Using the ABC model helps turn behaviour into useful information that guides support and builds understanding.

# Affirming and Respectful Language

## **What it is:**

Using words that reflect a positive, respectful view of autism and the autistic people in our lives.

## **Why it's useful:**

Language shapes how we think and feel. When we use affirming language, we show our children that they are accepted and valued for who they are.

## **How to implement it:**

- Use identity-first language (e.g. “autistic child” instead of “child with autism”)
- Avoid deficit-based language such as “suffers from autism,” “high-functioning,” or “disordered.”
- Focus on strengths as well as needs. Say things like “He communicates best with pictures,” rather than “He can’t talk.”
- Avoid terms like “normal” or “typical” when comparing. Instead of saying “She’s not like a normal child,” you could say “She does things in her own way.”

Respectful language tells our children: “You are okay just as you are.” That message can make a huge difference to how they see themselves—and how others see them too.

# Behaviour as Communication

## **What it is:**

Understanding that challenging behaviour is often how autistic children express feelings, needs, or discomfort when they don't have words or other ways to communicate.

## **Why it's useful:**

When we see behaviour as communication, we shift from reacting to the behaviour itself to trying to understand what your child is trying to tell us. This helps reduce frustration for both child and adult.

## **How to implement it:**

- Observe carefully: Look at what happens before, during, and after the behaviour to find possible triggers or causes.
- Ask questions: Could your child be tired, hungry, overwhelmed, in pain, or needing attention?
- Provide alternative ways to communicate: Use visuals, gestures, or communication devices to help your child express feelings or needs.
- Stay calm and patient: Respond with empathy rather than punishment.

Remember, behaviour is a message. Understanding it helps build trust and connection, creating a safer space for your child to thrive.

# Chewelry

## What it is:

Chewelry is chewable jewellery—necklaces or bracelets designed to be safely chewed.

## Why it's useful:

Many autistic children seek oral sensory input. Chewelry provides a safe, discreet way to meet this need without damaging clothing or chewing unsafe objects.

## How to implement it:

- Choose age-appropriate, non-toxic options.
- Offer during times of stress, concentration, or transition.
- Store in predictable, accessible places.
- Encourage use by modelling and reminding gently if needed.



# Choice Boards

## What it is:

A visual display of options that helps your child make a choice.

## Why it's useful:

Giving choices supports autonomy and can reduce anxiety or challenging behaviour. Choice boards make abstract decision-making more concrete.

## How to implement it:

- Present 2–6 options using pictures, symbols, or objects.
- Use for snacks, toys, activities, or clothing.
- Offer choices throughout the day to promote independence.
- Respect your child's choice, even if it's not your preference.



# Co-regulation

## What it is:

Co-regulation is when a calm, supportive adult helps a child manage their emotions and sensory needs by providing reassurance, steady presence, and gentle guidance.

**Why it's useful:** Autistic children sometimes find it hard to regulate their feelings on their own, especially when overwhelmed or anxious. Co-regulation helps them feel safe and understood, which can prevent meltdowns and support emotional development.

## How to implement it:

- Stay calm and patient, even when your child is upset. Your calmness helps them feel safer.
- Use soothing tones, gentle touch, and slow breathing to model calm behaviour.
- Help name feelings by saying things like, “I can see you’re feeling frustrated.”
- Remember, co-regulation is about connection and presence, not fixing the problem immediately.

By sharing calmness and empathy, you build your child's emotional resilience and trust.

# Ear Defenders

## **What it is:**

Special headphones designed to reduce or block out loud or overwhelming noises.

**Why it's useful:** Noisy environments can cause stress, anxiety, or even meltdowns. Ear defenders help protect your child's hearing and reduce sensory overload, making noisy places more manageable.

## **How to implement it:**

- Choose comfortable, well-fitting ear defenders suitable for your child's size and age.
- Introduce them gradually—let your child explore and wear them during quiet times first.
- Use them proactively in known noisy environments, or offer them as soon as your child shows signs of distress.
- Respect your child's preferences—some may want to wear them only occasionally or in specific situations.
- Consider personalised options like decorating the ear defenders or using favourite colours to encourage use.

Ear defenders can give your child greater control over their environment, helping them stay calm and engaged.

# Feelings Board

## What it is:

A visual tool that helps children recognise and communicate how they are feeling.

## Why it's useful:

Many autistic children struggle to identify or express emotions. A feelings board builds emotional awareness and provides a non-verbal way to communicate needs.

## How to implement it:

- Use pictures or symbols showing different emotions (happy, sad, angry, tired, overwhelmed, etc.).
- Add a mirror to support self-recognition.
- Pair the board with a calm space or regulation strategy.
- Check in regularly and model naming emotions.

I am feeling...



I am feeling...



When I feel sad I can...



# Fidgets

## **What it is:**

Small handheld objects designed to be fiddled with, squeezed, or manipulated to provide sensory input.

## **Why it's useful:**

Fidgets help autistic children focus, reduce anxiety, and manage sensory needs by giving their hands something to do.

## **How to implement it:**

- Choose fidgets that suit your child's preferences —some children prefer soft squishy toys, others like textured or noisy options.
- Keep a small selection available during activities that require focus, such as schoolwork or family meals.
- Teach your child how to use fidgets appropriately, encouraging them to use quietly and without distraction to others.
- Rotate fidgets regularly to maintain interest.
- Combine fidget use with other supports like visual schedules or timers for best effect.

Fidgets are a simple, discreet tool that can make a big difference to your child's comfort and focus.

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# Low-Arousal Spaces

## **What it is:**

A calm, quiet area where your child can go to feel safe, reduce sensory input, and self-regulate when overwhelmed or overstimulated.

## **Why it's useful:**

Autistic children can be highly sensitive to sensory input like noise, lights, smells, or busy environments. A low-arousal space gives them a break from these demands, helping to prevent meltdowns or shutdowns and support emotional wellbeing.

## **How to implement it:**

- Choose a quiet, low-traffic area of your home e.g., a corner of a room, a small tent, or even a den under a table.
- Keep it clutter-free and simple.
- Add comforting items.
- Respect their need to use it. Don't use it as a punishment, and avoid forcing interaction while they are using the space.

Over time, your child may learn to recognise when they need time in their low-arousal space. It's a practical way to support self-regulation and autonomy.

# Now/Next Boards

## What it is:

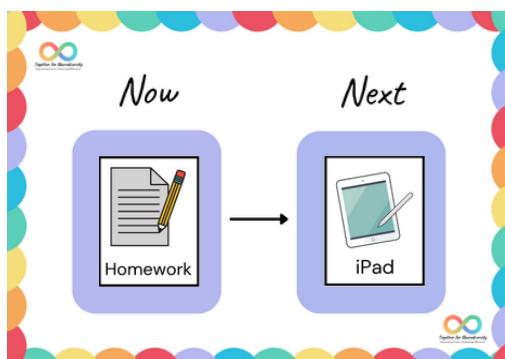
A simple board that shows what is happening now and what will happen next.

## Why it's useful:

These boards help children understand and manage transitions, reduce uncertainty, and build routine. They are ideal for children who benefit from short-term structure.

## How to implement it:

- Use two boxes: one for “Now” and one for “Next.”
- Include pictures or symbols that show what’s happening.
- Keep it simple: “Now – Snack, Next – Garden.”
- Use it throughout the day to preview transitions.



# One Page Profiles

## What it is:

A simple summary of what's important to your child, how they communicate, and how best to support them.

## Why it's useful:

Helps others quickly understand your child's needs, preferences, and strengths. Useful for teachers, support staff, babysitters, and extended family.

## How to implement it:

- Include sections like "What people like about me," "What's important to me," and "How best to support me."
- Use your child's voice as much as possible.
- Include photos or symbols.
- Keep it updated as your child grows.



# Regulation Kit

## **What it is:**

A collection of items that help your child calm down, focus, or feel more regulated.

## **Why it's useful:**

Regulation kits give children tools to manage their sensory and emotional needs. They support independence and can prevent meltdowns.

## **How to implement it:**

- Include items your child finds soothing or stimulating:
  - Fidgets
  - Chewelry
  - Noise-cancelling headphones / Ear Defenders
  - Sunglasses
  - Bubbles
  - Visual Supports
  - Feelings Board
  - Anything else that you feel would be helpful
- Store in a bag or box that's easy to access.
- Use alongside visual supports or feelings boards.
- Model how to use items to calm down.

# Sensory Breaks

## What it is:

Planned opportunities for your child to take a break and engage in a sensory activity that helps regulate their body and emotions.

## Why it's useful:

Sensory breaks can help calm a child who is overstimulated or re-energise one who is under-stimulated. These breaks support attention, reduce distress, and improve engagement in learning or social activities.

## How to implement it:

- Offer sensory breaks regularly or when you notice signs of dysregulation (e.g. fidgeting, withdrawal, or agitation).
- Include activities your child enjoys, such as; jumping on a trampoline, squeezing a stress ball, swinging or rocking, listening to calming music, using a weighted blanket.
- Keep breaks short and purposeful—5–10 minutes is often enough.

Sensory breaks are not a “reward” but a way to support your child’s sensory system and overall well-being.

# Sensory Circuits

## **What it is:**

A short sequence of physical and sensory-based activities that help prepare your child for learning, play, or everyday tasks.

## **Why it's useful:**

Sensory circuits help with regulation, focus, and readiness. They can calm a child who is overstimulated or energise one who is feeling sluggish or disconnected.

## **How to implement it:**

A sensory circuit usually follows a structure with three stages:

1. Alerting activities – to wake up the body and brain. For example: jumping jacks, bouncing on a trampoline, or running on the spot
2. Organising activities – to support coordination and focus. For example: crawling through a tunnel, balancing on a beam, or climbing.
3. Calming activities – to bring the body into a calm, regulated state. For example: deep pressure, breathing exercises, or slow rocking.

Sensory circuits don't need to be fancy or expensive. The key is finding what works for your child and making it part of a regular rhythm.

# Social Stories

## What it is:

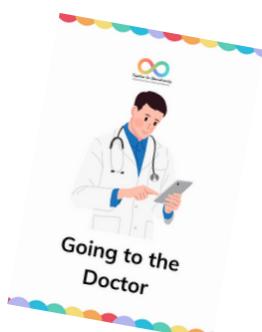
Short stories written in a specific way to explain social situations, rules, or expectations.

## Why it's useful:

Social stories help children prepare for new experiences, understand others' perspectives, and reduce anxiety in unfamiliar situations.

## How to implement it:

- Write from your child's point of view using positive, reassuring language.
- Use pictures or symbols alongside simple text.
- Read the story together regularly, especially before the event or activity.
- Examples include going to the dentist, starting school, or waiting in a queue.



# Therapy Balls

## **What it is:**

Therapy balls (also called exercise balls) are large, inflatable balls that can be used for sitting, bouncing, or doing movement exercises.

## **Why it's useful:**

Sitting on a therapy ball provides sensory input that can help improve posture, focus, and regulation.

## **How to implement it:**

- Use a therapy ball as a chair during activities like homework or mealtimes to encourage active sitting.
- Encourage gentle bouncing or rocking while seated to provide calming sensory input.
- Include simple exercises or stretches using the ball to develop balance and coordination.
- Always supervise use to ensure safety, especially with younger children.
- Start with short periods and increase as your child becomes more comfortable.

Therapy balls are a fun, active way to help your child stay engaged and regulated throughout the day.

# Use Concrete Language

## What it is:

Speaking in a clear, literal, and direct way that is easy for your child to understand.

**Why it's useful:** Many autistic children find abstract, vague, or figurative language confusing. Using concrete language reduces anxiety or miscommunication.

## How to implement it:

- Be specific and literal.
- Avoid idioms or sayings.
- Give clear instructions and break things down step-by-step.
- Avoid vague praise. Instead of “Good job,” say “I like how you packed away your puzzle.”
- Check understanding. Ask your child to show you or repeat what they’ve heard, rather than just saying “Do you understand?”

Using concrete language supports comprehension and builds your child’s confidence in social and learning situations. It helps make the world feel more predictable and less overwhelming.

# Use of Timers

## **What it is:**

A visual or auditory tool that counts down a set amount of time, helping your child understand how long an activity will last or when a transition will happen.

**Why it's useful:** Timers provide clear, predictable cues about time passing. They reduce anxiety around uncertainty, support transitions between activities, and encourage time management skills.

## **How to implement it:**

- Use visual timers that show time passing visibly.
- Use auditory timers to signal when time is up.
- Explain what the timer means.
- Practice with short periods first and gradually increase as your child gets used to it.
- Combine timers with visuals like Now/Next boards or checklists for extra clarity.
- Give warnings before the timer ends ("5 minutes left!") to prepare your child for transition.

Timers can be simple apps on a phone, kitchen timers, or special visual timers designed for children. The key is consistency and clear explanation.

# Use of Visuals

## **What it is:**

Tools that use pictures, symbols, words, or objects to help children understand and navigate their world.

## **Why it's useful:**

Visuals provide predictability, reinforce verbal communication, support memory, and reduce anxiety. They are especially helpful for routines, transitions, and making choices.

## **How to implement it:**

- Create visual schedules for daily routines (e.g. morning or bedtime).
- Use picture cards to offer choices (e.g. snack or playdough).
- Label rooms and storage with pictures and words.
- Use photo step-by-step guides for tasks like brushing teeth.

Visual supports can be printed, hand-drawn, or digital—whatever works best for your child.

# Visual Checklists

## **What it is:**

A series of pictures or symbols that show the steps in a task or routine.

## **Why it's useful:**

Visual checklists break down complex activities into manageable parts, making tasks easier to understand and complete supporting independence and reducing anxiety by providing clear expectations.

## **How to implement it:**

- Identify routines or tasks your child finds challenging.
- Create a checklist with simple images or symbols representing each step in order.
- Review the checklist together and encourage your child to follow the steps independently.
- Celebrate completion to build confidence and motivation.
- Update or simplify the checklist as your child learns and grows.

Visual checklists help make daily tasks predictable and manageable, supporting your child's autonomy.

# Weighted Lap Pad/Blanket

## **What it is:**

These are special items filled with small weights designed to provide gentle, even pressure on the body.

**Why it's useful:** Weighted lap pads or blankets can help reduce anxiety, improve focus, and support self-regulation by providing sensory input that feels soothing and reassuring.

## **How to implement it:**

- Choose a weighted lap pad or blanket appropriate for your child's size and weight.
- Use it during times your child needs to calm down.
- Start with short periods and observe your child's comfort and response.
- Encourage your child to use it independently whenever they feel they need extra calm.
- Avoid use if your child has any medical conditions that make weighted pressure unsuitable (consult a healthcare professional).

Weighted items can be a simple, natural way to help your child feel more settled and secure.