

How to Use Irritability Strategies to Help Your Child with Autism

DISCLAIMER: This summary provides overall strategies you can use to help your child. For more details, it may be helpful to read the tool kit 100 Day Kit for Young Children or 100 Day Kit for School-Age Children, and to communicate with your child's clinician about your concerns.

Who would benefit from the Irritability Tip Sheet?

Caregivers who have children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may be dealing with symptoms of irritability. Your child may not be able to properly communicate what they are feeling or thinking. This can lead to frustration and irritability, which in turn can lead to aggression or self-harming behavior.

How can creating strategies help to tackle irritability?

The intensity, frequency and severity of behaviors can be different for every person. Behaviors may also differ based on the setting, like home or school. These behaviors can also change over time. By using the strategies described here and in Autism Speaks tool kits, you will learn tips to help your child with difficult behaviors.

What are some signs of irritability?

- Aggression
- Self-harming behavior, such as head banging or harming their own body
- Severe tantrums or meltdowns
- Property destruction, such as breaking their own toys
- Running away or “eloping”

How to support your child:

- Use positive/proactive language, focusing on teaching them what they “can do,” instead of focusing on what they “can’t do.”
- Take a break between tasks and assignments.
- Build your child up for success by starting tasks you know they can complete before trying harder tasks.
- Communicate using concrete statements and the fewest words possible.
- Tell your child you understand their concerns, emotions and thoughts.



How to support your child:

- Create and offer a safe spot in your home where your child can take a break.
- Respect and listen to your child to understand what is causing their irritation.
- Remain calm and patient.

How to encourage positive behavior:

- Verbally praise good behavior when you see it throughout the day using specific words, like “Great job waiting quietly!”
- Provide reinforcement or a reward, such as an object or activity they like, immediately after your child shows specific positive behaviors you are teaching them.
- Use a visual schedule or other visual supports to provide structure and concretely tell your child when a transition is coming, what is coming next and other behavior expectations.
- Remove or reduce distractions, such as loud noises, clutter or bright lights, during particularly stressful activities.

How to decrease irritability:

- Consider what might be contributing to irritability, such as poor sleep, constipation, pain or environmental changes.
- Show respect for their thoughts and feelings. Take a step back and consider why they might be feeling this way, what is triggering them or what are they not able to communicate.
- Give your child simple choices (e.g., “Do you want to wear your red shirt or green shirt today?”)
- Try to identify the first signs of your child becoming upset and intervene before behavior worsens.
- If your doctor recommends medication, be patient with your child as they adjust.
- Keep communication open with your care team and your child’s healthcare provider. Keep the team updated on how medication is helping your child or how their behaviors have changed. Ask for additional suggestions and help if you need it.



How are you feeling?



For more information:

Visit autismspeaks.org to find all of our tool kits, including *Challenging Behaviors, An Introduction to Behavioral Health Treatments, ATN/AIR-P Visual Supports and Autism* and our *100 Day Kits for Young Children* and *School-Age Children*.