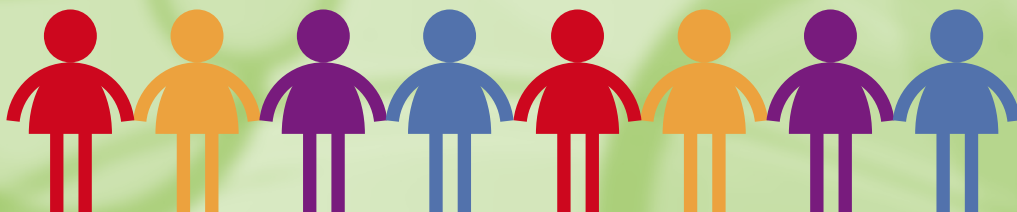




# Basic strategies to support children with Autism and other social communication difficulties

## For Families

By Karen L. Baker  
Rotherham Autism Communication Team



In this book:

- Know your child
- Communication
- Behaviour
- Sensory issues
- Social interaction
- Strategies



## Know your child!



This booklet is a basic introduction to helping you to support your child.

**Every child is unique - use the ideas you think will be best for your child and your family.**

You help them reach their full potential both socially and academically because you:-

- watch them and learn from them
- talk and listen to them
- understand them
- value them
- love them unconditionally

Every child has their own individual likes and dislikes, needs and talents. This is also true of a child on the autism spectrum.

Use and build on your child's interests, skills, strengths, positives.

Celebrate their strengths and successes (however big or small) through praise and simple rewards

Help build independence by knowing when to support and when to step back.



Get more information to help support your child and to improve your knowledge and understanding from: health, education, social services; support groups; websites; books and magazines.



### Keep up the good work

- ✓ SHARE information and ideas with family members and others who spend time with your child - strengths, interests, motivators, routines, calming strategies, behaviours.
- ✓ Make a pen portrait/profile of your child that you can share (see next page) - involve your child in making it.
- ✓ Try and build a good relationship with others involved in the development of your child e.g. school, organised activities and clubs, doctors, dentist.

**Always remember** - this is still **your** child. You're the expert on your child 😊

Name:

Birthday:

Picture of me

I am good at:



Things I like to eat or drink:



My favourite things are:



I want to be better at...



Things I like to do:



I will understand you better if you...



Things I don't like to do:



If I get worried or upset I might show it by...



Medical information:



Things that help me calm:



# Communication

**Message Sent = Message Received . . . or does it?**

Processing spoken or written language may be difficult for your child. Many children on the autism spectrum can appear to understand more than they actually do, particularly if their spoken language is good.

Communication can be verbal (the words we say) and non-verbal (the messages we give without speaking).

## **Communication differences or difficulties you may notice include:**

| Verbal                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Non-verbal                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ May use different accent</li><li>➤ Repeat programmes, films or stories</li><li>➤ Processing of spoken language may take longer</li><li>➤ May have a very literal understanding of speech</li><li>➤ Don't 'get' humour or sarcasm</li></ul> | <p>Poor understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Eye contact</li><li>➤ Body language</li><li>➤ Facial expressions</li><li>➤ Subtle gestures</li><li>➤ Personal space</li></ul> |



**You may need to change the way you communicate with your child**



- Use their name to get their attention
- Less language - clear, simple, unambiguous
- Beware of literal understanding
- Say what you mean & mean what you say
- Break instructions down into smaller parts
- Allow thinking time

Follow through with any 'promises' made - comments like 'if there's time; later; at the end of the week; in a minute; tomorrow' can cause problems if the thing that is promised does not actually happen.



**It will help if you:**



- Make expectations clear, realistic and achievable
- Check for distractions in the environment - sensory overload
- Use a Pen portrait/profile to help others to communicate well with your child
- Think - Is there a clearer way to say it?

### **Use visual supports as permanent reminders:**

- Calendars, daily/weekly timetable
- Label areas of the room/equipment
- Timer to show time available/left for an activity
- Lists/photographs/drawings/ to show what is expected for specific tasks *e.g. morning, bedtime or bathroom routine*

*Make visual supports age appropriate and as practical as possible*



Sometimes the way you speak to your child, especially when they are under stress, may sound rude to other people

**Remember you're trying to help your child not please other people**



## Humour

- Explain why things are funny
- Teach and practise how to tell simple jokes
- Your child may enjoy visual 'slapstick' or cartoon humour - visual humour can be easier to understand than humour that relies on words/language
- Avoid using sarcasm - but explain it to your child once they are old enough to understand



Questions like

*Can you open the door?*

*Do you know where the TV remote is?*

*Can you tell me if there's a bus due?*

might be answered with a simple yes or no or

"Yes, I can/No, I can't"

Be clear about what you're asking and check whether you've asked it in the best way

*Get a wriggle on*



*It's raining cats and dogs*



*Go and wash your hands in the toilet - really?*

*I laughed my socks off*

*I've got a frog in my throat*



## Taking things literally

Is that what you really meant to say???

*Have you got out of the wrong side of the bed?*



Phrases like

*"Would you like to pick that up?"* or

*"Shall we do some reading now?"*

suggest that we are offering a choice when we are actually giving an instruction - don't be surprised if the response is "No!"



*Let's keep our fingers crossed*

*"You haven't tidied your room yet"*  
Are you just stating the obvious or did you mean "Tidy your room"?

## Helpful hints

- ✓ Less talk/Reduce language - e.g. 'Coat off, sit down' rather than 'Can you hurry up and take your coat off now then go and sit down for me please'
- ✓ Explain clearly and simply - I may need to know 'why?'
- ✓ Repeat the same clear instruction if they have not understood or responded appropriately
- ✓ Make things as concrete as possible (practical/physical/real objects) - abstract concepts (ideas/theories/opinions/views) will need clear explanation
- ✓ Give positive instructions rather than saying what not to do e.g. say "Hands down" rather than "No scratching"
- ✓ Give warnings/countdowns for finishing activities rather than 'surprising' your child with an abrupt ending

Processing verbal and written language can be hard work for your child  
**Fewer words = less work**



## Social interaction

Children on the autism spectrum can find it difficult to be around other people or to understand social situations. Their reactions to people or situations can appear unusual or even rude. This is unintentional and is often linked to the stress or anxiety of the situation.



### **I might:**

- Not understand the unwritten social rules *e.g. waiting in queues; standing too close; interrupting*
- Show an increase in stress levels or inappropriate behaviour
- Be unaware of other people's feelings or points of view
- Have difficulty reading/understanding facial expressions and body language
- Know what to do but simply not be able to do it
- Have difficulty transferring social skills from one situation to another
- Find turn-taking and sharing hard - team games and sports can be challenging
- Upset or offend people without meaning to



GIVE SPACE  
and TIME

Try to keep  
things  
predictable

Know your  
child's limit

**Planning and preparation**  
Involve your child so they  
know what the plan is

### **Social times and situations that may be stressful:**

- School/college, organised activities
- Shops and supermarkets
- Busy play areas
- Crowded/noisy environments
- Family occasions
- Eating out
- Parties/ Christmas
- Trips/days out
- Holidays - away and at home
- Travelling
- Medical appointments
- Visitors
- Change to routine or plans
- Having free time - lack of structure

Include something  
they are interested  
in doing if possible

**Have a plan B**  
Think about changes -  
weather,  
travel arrangements,  
cancellations

Avoid  
sensory  
overload

Make activities  
time limited

Choose a quieter time of  
day/week/year for  
shopping, travelling or trips

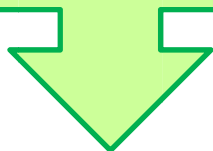


# Friendships



## I don't always understand:

- What a friend is
- How to make and keep friends
- How to share and take turns
- Other people may feel, think or want or like different things to me



Introduce one friend and build up to a small group over time

Your child may prefer the company of adults or younger children - their behaviour is more predictable and consistent than children their own age



Rehearse games and activities in advance

Try not to worry if your child appears not to have friends - they may prefer to be on their own  
**Is it a problem for them or for other people?**

## Friends

- ✓ A friend is a person who is not in my family but is important to me.
- ✓ A friend is a person who is special because we like each other.
- ✓ A friend spends time with me. We enjoy being together.
- ✓ If there are things that I want to do but my friend does not want to do that is okay. I can do those things later by myself or with someone else.
- ✓ Good friends learn to get along.
- ✓ I will try to be a good friend.



Teach the rules of simple games to all the family so your child knows what is expected



Give free time some structure and routine

Encourage everyday sharing and turn-taking. Use the language when possible e.g. *"One for me, one for you"* when offering biscuits or *"It's my turn to open the door"* when going into a shop



Friendship might simply mean being alongside someone with a shared interest e.g. Thomas the Tank Engine, Lego, Minecraft, Anime, music, online gaming, Parkour (free running).

## Winning

Your child may always want to win or to be first

- ✓ I like to play games.
- ✓ Sometimes I play games at home.
- ✓ There are lots of different sorts of games.
- ✓ I might play a game with one person or with lots of people.
- ✓ People take turns when they play games together.
- ✓ Sometimes I might win a game and sometimes I might lose.
- ✓ It is okay to lose.
- ✓ When people lose a game they say "Well done" to the winner. They do not get angry. This makes them a good loser.
- ✓ I will try to be a good loser.





## Celebrations and special occasions



### Remember:

- Check whether I like surprises *e.g. visits, parties or presents*
- I might not want presents to be wrapped up or to be things I haven't asked for
- I might be honest and tell someone if I don't like them
- Just because they're family doesn't mean I want to spend time with them
- Don't make me do it for longer than planned just because I seem to be coping - we can try to do it longer next time



It should be fun for 😊 everyone!



**Give advance warning of visitors**  
But don't be surprised if your child keeps asking when they're going to leave

Keep something they enjoy handy as a distraction

### Eating out

Think about where to sit - at the end of the table, in a booth, next to the door, near the toilets, in a quieter area



### Prepare and practise an escape plan

- Meet and greet people
- Take part in the most important activities from a 'safe' distance
- Move to a quiet place
- Return to say goodbye



Keep checking for signs of stress or anxiety  
**Social + Sensory = overload?**

### Helpful hints

- ✓ Teach simple social skills/what to do in certain situations (use Social Stories) *e.g. practise what to do when: meeting and greeting people; asking for help; buying something in a shop; catching a bus; eating in a restaurant; answering questions; making simple conversation*
- ✓ Give support during social activities - share information with others involved with your child so the support is consistent
- ✓ Decide on the purpose of a social activity - who is it for? It may not be as much 'fun' for your child as it is for everyone else involved
- ✓ Limit the number of people your child will need to interact with at the same time
- ✓ Use a 'first - then' approach *e.g. shopping first - then treat*
- ✓ Provide your child with an escape plan

We all need some 'me' time



# Making sense of sensory information

Our senses are always providing us with information - through our own bodies (internal) and from the environment around us (external)

*taste, touch hearing, smell, sight*



**balance/movement**

helps us maintain our balance and posture and understand where and how fast our bodies are moving



**body awareness**

tells us where our bodies are in space and how different body parts are moving



**How we interpret this information helps us to make sense of the world around us**

Too much information (hyper or over sensitive) = overload

Too little information (hypo or under sensitive) = confusion

Any or all of the senses can be over or under sensitive

*It's possible to be over sensitive in some areas and under sensitive in others*

The levels of hypo and hypersensitivity can vary or not be present at all at times

*Situations that cause extra stress or anxiety (e.g. social, communication) affect the ability to process sensory information*

Your child may find it hard to make sense of what is happening or to concentrate on what is important

**Difficulties with sensory processing can affect:**  
how your child feels, how they think and how they behave

**Reduce the impact of sensory difficulties:**

- ✓ Check for changes you can make to their environment
- ✓ Prepare them for new sensory experiences
- ✓ Have a back-up plan for times when there's a sensory overload
- ✓ Plan in time for positive sensory experiences (the things they enjoy *e.g. movement - spinning or swinging of self or objects; opportunities to make noise or have quiet time; bright/reduced/moving lighting; access to their quiet/safe space or their special interest*)

Try to identify your child's sensory difficulties  
**How do they experience the world?**

Paying too much attention to **unnecessary** sensory information or not enough attention to **necessary** sensory information can make them feel **confused, anxious or upset**

**Complete the sensory checklist**  
(See next page)

# Sensory assessment checklist

(based on the sensory profile checklist from Bogdashina, 2003 and included in the IDP autism spectrum)

Tick which apply and then consider which teaching staff need to know this information.

Where possible, complete this in discussion with the parents or carers and the pupil.

| No. | Item                                                     | Yes | No | Don't know | Action required |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|------------|-----------------|
| 1   | Resists changes to familiar routines                     |     |    |            |                 |
| 2   | Does not recognise familiar people in unfamiliar clothes |     |    |            |                 |
| 3   | Dislikes bright lights                                   |     |    |            |                 |
| 4   | Dislikes fluorescent lights                              |     |    |            |                 |
| 5   | Is frightened by flashes of light                        |     |    |            |                 |
| 6   | Puts hands over eyes or closes eyes in bright light      |     |    |            |                 |
| 7   | Is attracted to lights                                   |     |    |            |                 |
| 8   | Is fascinated by shiny objects and bright colours        |     |    |            |                 |
| 9   | Touches the walls of rooms                               |     |    |            |                 |
| 10  | Enjoys certain patterns (e.g. brickwork, stripes)        |     |    |            |                 |
| 11  | Gets lost easily                                         |     |    |            |                 |
| 12  | Has a fear of heights, lifts, escalators                 |     |    |            |                 |
| 13  | Has difficulty catching balls                            |     |    |            |                 |
| 14  | Is startled when approached by others                    |     |    |            |                 |
| 15  | Smells, licks, taps objects and people                   |     |    |            |                 |
| 16  | Appears not to see certain colours                       |     |    |            |                 |
| 17  | Uses peripheral vision when doing a task                 |     |    |            |                 |

| No. | Item                                                        | Yes | No | Don't know | Action required |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|------------|-----------------|
| 18  | Finds it easier to listen when not looking at person        |     |    |            |                 |
| 19  | Remembers routes and places extremely well                  |     |    |            |                 |
| 20  | Can memorise large amounts of information on certain topics |     |    |            |                 |
| 21  | Finds crowded areas very difficult                          |     |    |            |                 |
| 22  | Prefers to sit at back of group or front of group           |     |    |            |                 |
| 23  | Covers ears when hears certain sounds                       |     |    |            |                 |
| 24  | Can hear sounds which others do not hear                    |     |    |            |                 |
| 25  | Is very distressed by certain sounds                        |     |    |            |                 |
| 26  | Bangs objects and doors                                     |     |    |            |                 |
| 27  | Is attracted by sounds and noises                           |     |    |            |                 |
| 28  | Does not like shaking hands or being hugged                 |     |    |            |                 |
| 29  | Likes a hug if chosen to do this                            |     |    |            |                 |
| 30  | Only seems to hear the first words of a sentence            |     |    |            |                 |
| 31  | Repeats exactly what others have said                       |     |    |            |                 |
| 32  | Very good auditory memory for songs and rhymes              |     |    |            |                 |
| 33  | Dislikes the feel of certain fabrics and substances         |     |    |            |                 |
| 34  | Seems unaware of pain and temperature                       |     |    |            |                 |
| 35  | Dislikes certain foods and drinks                           |     |    |            |                 |
| 36  | Seeks pressure by crawling under heavy objects              |     |    |            |                 |
| 37  | Hugs very tightly                                           |     |    |            |                 |
| 38  | Enjoys feeling certain materials                            |     |    |            |                 |



| No. | Item                                                                      | Yes | No | Don't know | Action required |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|------------|-----------------|
| 39  | Dislikes certain everyday smells                                          |     |    |            |                 |
| 40  | Eats materials which are not edible                                       |     |    |            |                 |
| 41  | Likes to have food presented in a certain way on the plate                |     |    |            |                 |
| 42  | Dislikes crunchy or chewy food                                            |     |    |            |                 |
| 43  | Quite clumsy and bumps into objects and people                            |     |    |            |                 |
| 44  | Finds fine motor movements hard                                           |     |    |            |                 |
| 45  | Has difficulty running and climbing                                       |     |    |            |                 |
| 46  | Finds it hard to ride a bike                                              |     |    |            |                 |
| 47  | Does not seem to know where body is in space                              |     |    |            |                 |
| 48  | Has poor balance                                                          |     |    |            |                 |
| 49  | Afraid of everyday movement activities such as swings, slides, trampoline |     |    |            |                 |
| 50  | Has extremely good balance                                                |     |    |            |                 |



# Behaviour

... disruptive? ... distracting? ... harmful to self or others? ... irritating?

... for no apparent reason?

## All behaviour:

- has a purpose
- is an attempt to communicate something
- is a natural response to releasing stress and anxiety

Sometimes the purpose is obvious but there are times when we can't understand the message being communicated

Focus on one thing at a time

## Might include:

- withdrawal/bottle up/shutdown
- extreme anxiety/emotional outburst
- anger/explosion/meltdown
- avoiding demands
- increase in repetitive behaviours
- intensity of restricted interests
- no sense of danger
- not understanding consequences of their actions
- different behaviour in different places

What's causing the most problems right now?

When there are lots of behaviours it's difficult to know where to start

Don't worry about other people's expectations and opinions - they don't know your child

Prioritise - be realistic about what you can handle

Pick your battles

Don't take it personally  
It's not your fault

Can happen at any time, anywhere and with anyone

Try to stay calm  
Remember you are the adult

## Often caused by:

- stress/anxiety
- change
- new people/situations
- lack of understanding
- communication difficulties
- sensory issues (environment)
- personal pressure - "perfectionist"
- expectations of others - peer/academic/social

Take small steps

May be because of a single incident or a build of things over time

## Could it be:

- For attention
- Wanting to get something tangible

Be confident about doing what you know works for your child

Avoid shouting but be clear and firm

# Making changes

Eat the elephant in small bites!



Is it a problem for your child, you or other people? Do the adults (you or others) need to change your attitude or approach to the behaviour rather than change the behaviour itself?

- Identify the behaviours you want to change - use the Iceberg approach (see next page)
- Are there patterns or triggers to the behaviour?
- Are sensory differences causing the behaviour?
- Consider the possible strategies/solutions
- Make a behaviour plan
- Share the plan with others who spend time with your child
- Evaluate - How is it going? Is it working? What next?

You may need to "think outside the box" when finding a solution



An escape route

**YOU**

A safety net

They trust you

Provide a safe environment to let their feelings out

Some behaviour may change quickly but most will take longer

***In some cases the behaviour may become worse before it gets better - keep going!***  
Being consistent gets results

## Helpful hints

- ✓ **Plan ahead** - know what's coming, think about possible triggers for your child and the strategies you could use
- ✓ **Give your child advance warning** (how far in advance will depend on your child) - use calendars, lists, pictures as visual reminders
- ✓ **Look for signs of stress** - reduce the demands being made, move out of the situation, use calming strategies
- ✓ **Allow time and space** - a quiet, safe area to retreat to; use it to help calm/chill/'come down'/de-stress. You will need to teach and encourage them to use it - they may not recognise when they need it
- ✓ **Special interests** - recognise the *need* to do the things they enjoy
- ✓ **Give transition 'down time'** - your child may need some breathing space between changes from place to place or activity to activity *e.g. coming home from school or organised activities; having visitors*. Try not to overwhelm them with questions - the build of stress and anxiety needs to be released first
- ✓ Use Social Stories to help your child understand what to do in specific situations

**Remember**  
Self-care - make time to look after yourself!

# Behaviour

1) **WHAT** is the behaviour you see?  
Describe it so everyone can agree what it is, when it has happened and when it has not.

2) **WHY** has the behaviour happened? Think about what could have caused it – has something changed; did something happen first?

## Aggressive Iceberg

**WHAT?**

Pushing  
Spitting  
Throwing  
Hitting  
Biting

**WHY?**

Unaware of social rules  
Unaware of other people's feelings  
Sensory overload  
Frustration over inability to communicate appropriately  
Inappropriate reaction to others

## Passive Iceberg

**WHAT?**

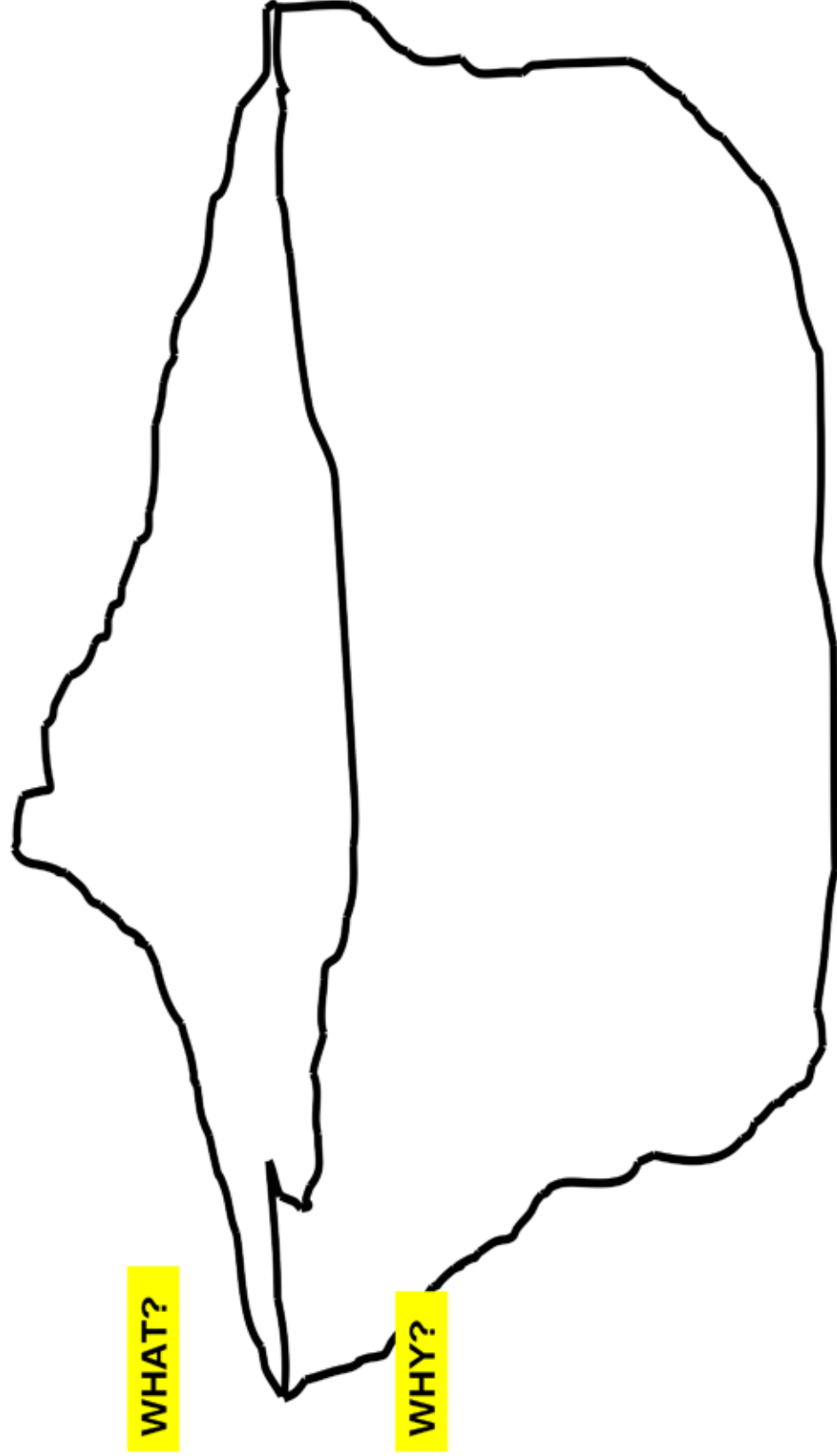
Appears lazy  
Over- dependent  
Unmotivated  
Waits for prompts

**WHY?**

Unaware of other people  
Poor concept of time  
Does not understand future rewards  
Unmotivated by usual rewards  
Does not understand expectations



# Practise using the Iceberg



1) **WHAT** is the behaviour you see? Describe it so everyone can agree what it is, when it has happened and when it has not.

2) **WHY** has the behaviour happened? Think about what could have caused it – has something changed; did something happen first?



Sometimes you need to try things more than once. Maybe your child wasn't ready or you didn't quite get it right the first time. Perhaps something that was successful in the past might work for a similar situation that's happening now. It's easy to forget what ideas you've tried and how they went. When you've decided on a behaviour you want to change use the table below to make a note of ideas you try and to keep a record of what went well or any changes you made.

| What is the behaviour? | What causes it? |
|------------------------|-----------------|
|                        |                 |

[illegible]

# Behaviour plan recording sheet



You should try out your ideas for about 6 weeks to give them chance to work and for you to make any small changes if needed

| Ideas tried | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 | Week 6 | How did it go? |
|-------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|----------------|
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |
|             |        |        |        |        |        |        |                |



- ✓ Work on one behaviour at a time
- ✓ Make it achievable - your child needs to experience success
- ✓ Be realistic
- ✓ Be consistent
- ✓ Catch them doing the right thing and praise them
- ✓ Recognise that small changes are actually big successes

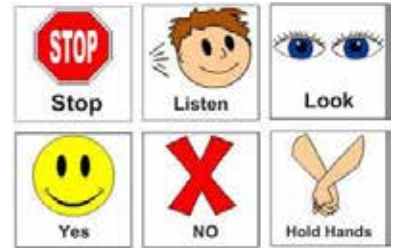


# Visual Supports

Use simple visual supports to:

- give simple instructions
- label rooms or areas in the house or garden
- provide boundaries around safety or privacy e.g. stop/go for playing on the grass; a cross, hand or no entry on the bathroom door to show there's someone using it
- give warning of a change

What does it look like?



Support everyday routines  
Sequencing  
Independence  
Organisation



Wash Your Hands to Stay Healthy



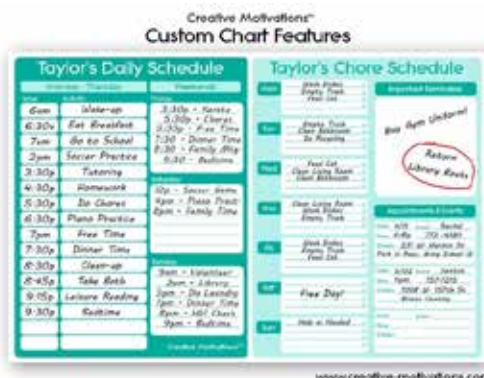
| Sunday | Monday      | Tuesday | Wednesday          | Thursday           | Friday | Saturday |
|--------|-------------|---------|--------------------|--------------------|--------|----------|
| 17     | 18          | 19      | 20                 | 21                 | 22     | 23       |
|        |             |         |                    | Last day of school |        |          |
| 24     | 25 Shopping | 26      | 27 Discovery Place | 28 library         | 29     | 30       |
| 31     | 1 Camp      | 2 Camp  | 3 Camp             | 4 Camp             | 5 Camp | 6        |

Planning and preparation

- 'first/then' approach
- calendars
- timetables
- schedules

Get it right

- ✓ Choose what works best for your child
- ✓ Make it age appropriate
- ✓ Practise - give it time
- ✓ Involve your child in making them
- ✓ Personalise them to include your child's special interests or motivators



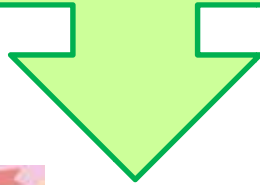




### Motivation - What's in it for me?

Work out what motivates your child

Use any characters or activities they like to help them cope with the things they don't enjoy *e.g. a special character towel, soap or toys for bath time; a special Lego model to build when eating out; time on a favourite computer game after doing homework;*



### Rewards - make them:

- Immediate - to link them with the reason for the reward
- Short/sharp
- Meaningful to your child
- Manageable and reasonable

*They could include:*

Praise; a smile; thumbs up; a 'high 5' or handshake; some time spent with you doing something they enjoy (playing a game; a walk to the park; listening to music); stickers; reward charts; a magazine or small toy; something linked to their special interest

*\*Limit the use of food as a reward*



Make open ended activities time limited:

- 1 game of ...
- 1 episode of ...
- Use a timer, clock or stopwatch to count down



**Remember:** some children don't like to be the centre of attention

### Strengths can include:

- ✓ Highly skilled in area of interest
- ✓ Tendency to be logical
- ✓ Strong sense of justice and fairness
- ✓ Independent thinking - different ways of looking at things
- ✓ Visual processing - can see how things could look
- ✓ Honest communication
- ✓ Loyal
- ✓ Non-judgemental

Things  
You  
Enjoy

Things  
You Are  
Good At

