



# Signposts

for building better behaviour

## Autism Spectrum Disorders

*Facilitator Notes*

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## Autism Spectrum Disorders Overview

The material in this booklet is to be used by facilitators trained in the *Signposts for building better behaviour program*. Signposts facilitators have the knowledge, experience and skills to successfully guide parents to develop a range of skills. These materials are a valuable supplement to the Signposts program and can help parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ABI) manage their child's behaviour.

As in the parent notes, the term 'autism' is used to refer to all children with an autism spectrum disorder.

These Autism supplementary resources are to be used together with the generic Signposts Facilitator's Manual and the Signposts parent materials (workbook, modules and other resources). The supplementary Facilitator Notes provide an overview of the strategies that parents need to be familiar with in order to teach their children with autism new skills and behaviours.

Facilitators can print the Parent Notes for parents to use in groups, face-to-face sessions, by telephone or self-directed as they follow the module structure of the generic Signposts program.

## Using the Signposts program

- » Review the Facilitator's Manual and parent modules, workbook and other resources in the generic Signposts program.
- » Familiarise yourself with the supplementary materials.
- » It is recommended that you conduct further reading on autism spectrum disorders and their impact on behaviour. See the [resources section of the Parent Notes](#).

# Delivering Signposts for autism

## Introduction to autism

### Preparation

- » Read and familiarise yourself with the generic Signposts Facilitator's Manual, the parent materials and the supplementary autism materials.
- » The Parent Notes contain examples of behaviours of children with autism spectrum disorders and strategies for addressing them. Plan how you will incorporate this material during your delivery of Signposts.
- » A set of program adherence checklists specific to autism has been provided. These will be most useful if you are running the Signposts program only with families of children with autism. If you have a mixed group with only one or a few families with autism, then you will probably find it easier to work with the regular Signposts checklists, though you may still like to refer to the autism checklists to be sure you have covered all the autism-specific issues for these families.

If you have parents of children with autism in your regular Signposts group, provide parents with the autism Parent Notes and encourage them to read and refer to this information throughout the program.

## Using the autism supplementary materials

When you became a Signposts facilitator you participated in training which included the content of the program and how to deliver it. You also had the option to co-facilitate with an experienced facilitator.

Before you begin using Signposts autism materials read these Facilitator Notes as well as the Parent Notes to familiarise yourself with the content. The autism Introduction replaces the Introduction booklet of the generic resources. The modules are supplements and should be used in conjunction with the standard Signposts program.

The Parent Notes contain autism-specific information to help facilitators and parents apply the Signposts program to dealing with difficult behaviours with children with autism. They frequently refer to the generic resources. To help parents move easily between the supplementary resources and the generic resources, stickers have been provided to place in the appropriate positions in the workbook and modules.



**An A4 sheet of stickers is available in the Parent Resources. Details of where to place the stickers are included in the Parent Notes Introduction. Sticker placement should take no longer than quarter of an hour and can be completed by parents in Session 1.**

We recommend you deliver the Signposts program in its entirety and refer to the supplementary autism spectrum disorder notes as you work through the program.

See Parent Resources for A4 sheet of stickers.

See Parent Notes Introduction page xx for Module sticker placement.

See Parent Notes Introduction page xx for Workbook sticker placement.

## Effects of social and communication difficulties on behaviour

This section examines what can happen as a result of the child's social and communication difficulties.

### Reading social cues and the social environment

In the Parent Notes there is a description of one of the core features of autism related to difficulties with social interaction.

You may already have prior experience with this feature from talking to or working with families of children with autism.

As a result of these social difficulties, the child may not understand:

- » that a frown may be intended to warn him against an unwanted behaviour
- » why you are laughing
- » why someone is angry after he interrupted a conversation
- » why Johnny is upset about his toy being broken
- » why mum doesn't know what happened in his favourite TV program (after all, he knows about it)
- » why David is mad at him after he told his teacher that David broke a school rule.

Mistakes and misunderstandings like these lead the child with autism into trouble. He makes socially unacceptable mistakes and people get angry with him. He doesn't understand why others are angry or why he gets set up by other children and gets into trouble. He then reacts to the situation, maybe with an explosion of anger of his own or maybe by laughing inappropriately. Then he is in more trouble and he is confused.



These are just some examples of how problems with social interaction can lead to difficult behaviour. Have parents reflect on their child's social skills and think about a time when these led to trouble. Ask them to share an example with the group. (Parents should have some answers to share if they have completed the exercise on page 12 of the Parent Notes Introduction.)

## **What do you do if you can't communicate?**

As we have seen in the Parent Notes, not being able to communicate properly may range from the extreme of not talking, through to having trouble with reciprocal conversations and jokes and taking what is said literally.

If you can't talk and you want something, what can you do? You might gesture, but many children with autism have trouble with gestures. You might simply go and get that drink yourself, but if you are small you may have difficulty reaching the drink, you might fall off the chair, drop the milk and drop the glass, get frustrated and throw a tantrum.

Maybe you can point, but only vaguely.

### ***Example***

*The orange soft drink is in the cupboard up there, why doesn't mum know what I mean? First the biscuits, then the cake, then the coke, I've had enough, I'm going to scream!*

You might know how to say 'drink' but not get the drink you wanted.

**Example**

*I said “drink”, but Gran doesn’t give me the milk I want, she gets that horrid cordial out. I’ll try again: “Drink!” What? Cordial again! I have had enough!*

Again, the result is a difficult behaviour that is whatever the child usually does when he is frustrated.

**Example**

*Sam can talk well. He loves to tell everyone he meets about the planets, statistics on Jupiter and Mars and information about space flights to explore the Martian surface. Sam has endless questions about planets and stars. Some get answered but others Mum simply doesn’t know the answer to. Mum is tired and she snaps. Sam gets upset about Mum’s unwillingness to continue to answer his important questions.*

These are just some examples of how communication difficulties can lead to difficult behaviour. Have parents reflect on their child’s communication and think about a time when it led to trouble. Ask them share an example. (Parents should have some answers to share if they have completed the Autism Introduction homework on page 12).

## **Behaviour as a consequence of social/communication difficulties**

As the above examples show, social and communication difficulties can lead a child with autism to ‘behave badly’ from the perspective of other people. This is not to say that the child with autism is entitled to have what he wants. Just like any other child, what he wants may

be inappropriate or dangerous. However, his social/communication deficits mean that he may have trouble communicating what he wants to you, and also have trouble understanding why the answer is 'No' or the behaviour is not allowed. Thus he does not calm down easily.

## **Repetitive behaviour and self-stimulatory (stims) behaviour**

As well as the impact of social and communication difficulties on behaviour, children with autism, as you have read in the Parent Notes, often have a number of other difficult behaviours, such as adherence to routines, not coping with change, and repetitive behaviours.

Many of the other behaviours that children with autism engage in can be annoying and socially inappropriate, but they often serve as a stress reliever for the child. However, these are often the behaviours that parents want to change or eliminate. If you eliminate or suppress some of these behaviours, your child will most likely replace it with something else that may be worse than the original behaviour. Thus in many cases, teaching the child to use the behaviour under restricted conditions is a better alternative.

### ***Example***

*A child jumps up and down and stims (wiggles and flaps his hands in front of his eyes) as a response to overwhelming or stressful activities or situations like school. His parents teach him that it is okay to 'unwind' by jumping on a mini-trampoline while stimming, in his bedroom, after school, for up to 30 minutes.*

If a child head bangs as a release from stress, however, this dangerous and very inappropriate behaviour would need to be completely eliminated by replacing it with a more appropriate form of stress relief.

## Stress and anxiety and the child with autism

We know from research and from working with children with autism that **many children suffer from high levels of stress and anxiety**. We shouldn't be surprised about that. These children are in a world where much of what is occurring is overwhelming for them. They cannot understand or can only partly understand why people act as they do; they have trouble communicating via speech or gestures, and may not speak at all; and they may be very sensitive to the overwhelming number of environmental stimuli present in some situations, for example at a shopping centre. This is enough to make anyone stressed or anxious, and stress and anxiety are associated with difficult behaviour. Therefore, stress and difficult behaviour can occur because the child may perceive and/or respond differently to his environment compared to other children. Things that cause anxiety and stress in children with autism are often quite different to things that evoke the same responses in other children.

## Generalisation

A final word about behaviour: When a child with autism learns what to do in one situation he generally has trouble using that information in other similar situations or places. We refer to this as a difficulty with **generalising** behaviour.

## IN FOCUS

We all know what to do in a restaurant, even if each restaurant is a bit different in the way it is set out. We form a general picture or 'restaurant schema' that includes the common features of eating in a restaurant. Thus, whenever we are in any restaurant we know what is expected, what to do and how we should behave.

Evidence suggests that to varying degrees, children with autism have difficulty in seeing how situations or events or places are similar – they have trouble forming a schema like the 'restaurant schema'. Therefore every situation may seem like a new one to a child with autism when to other people without autism it is essentially the same.

If every situation or event or place is different, then how do you know what to do next time? The lack of an ability to generalise what has been learned to new people, places and situations can lead to apparently difficult behaviour. Thus incorporating planning for generalisation with multiple people, places and examples in any behaviour change program is particularly important with these children.

## Autism and families

### The broader autism phenotype

Researchers and those working with families of children with autism now talk about the broader autism phenotype. What does this mean?

Autism is now known to be a biologically based developmental disorder that affects brain development from a very early age. We know that there is a genetic basis to autism: it is very common for both twins of an identical pair to have an autism spectrum disorder and we know that autism spectrum disorders run in families. Multiple genes seem to interact to cause autism and traits that we associate with autism are on a continuum with normal behaviour.

Thus parents of children with autism may also show subtle communication and social skills difficulties. Research also indicates that there is an increased risk for parents to have obsessive compulsive disorder. These factors all seem to be associated with the 'autism genes'.

Parents, particularly mothers, are more likely than expected to suffer from depression and this appears to be independent of an association with any 'autism genes' or the extra stress associated with having a child with autism. Anxiety among mothers has also been reported.

Therefore when you are working with families of children with autism you need to be aware that some parents may have subtle social and/or communication difficulties, or that these parents are at risk for depression and anxiety. When present, these characteristics may affect your interactions with parents.

## How are families the same or different?

In general, families of children with a disability experience higher levels of stress than other families. This stress is largely associated with raising a child with a disability, and relates to things such as aspects of the child's specific problems, schooling, dealing with professionals, finances and the future. Research evidence shows that stress associated with the child is highest when the child has significant behaviour difficulties.

Parents of children with autism often report among the highest levels of child-related stress, and some recent evidence suggests that the highest stress levels are associated with the significant behaviour difficulties many children with autism have. Thus, like families of children with a disability in general, families of children with autism experience higher levels of stress when behaviour difficulties are present.

We know that families of children with autism feel less stressed if they are able to deal appropriately with their child's difficult behaviours – when parents feel that they can take their child on an outing more easily or get a baby sitter so they can go out. They also feel more in control and feel more supported.

Behaviour management skills like those used in Signposts help parents and others manage difficult behaviour in children with autism and help the children learn to manage their own behaviour. Thus the Signposts module 'Dealing with stress in the family' is an essential, not optional component of Signposts for families of children with autism.

## Siblings of children with autism

Overall, the treatment of and challenges for siblings of children with autism are similar to siblings of children with other disabilities. There may be a tendency for siblings to be at risk of psychological problems, though they generally appear to cope well with their brother or sister with autism.

Siblings need to know about their brother's, or sister's disability at a level that is suited to their age and current level of development. Children may not understand what autism is or that it is something they cannot 'catch' like a cold or the flu.

### IN FOCUS

American researchers found that about 20 per cent of siblings aged 5–17 reported that they had never heard the word 'autism' whereas only 8 per cent of their parents thought they may not know the word. This study also found that children's understanding of autism was poorer than might be expected from their age and general level of understanding.

A recent Australian study found that most 8–15 year-olds had a reasonable knowledge about autism or Asperger's disorder.

Siblings who understand that their brother or sister has autism and what this means may feel stronger and adjust well to their sibling's developmental disability. As they get older, information should be elaborated on to keep pace with the sibling's development and increased ability to understand.



Brothers and sisters also need their own time with their parents. Most of the research evidence we have indicates that the majority of children who have a sibling with autism are generally as well adjusted as other children in the community. But it is important to make sure that siblings understand what autism is and what it means for their brother and sister. This will help families work better as a team. This could be incorporated into the Signposts *Your family as a team* module which is essential, not optional, for families of children with autism.

## Program Adherence checklists for autism spectrum disorders

These checklists have been developed for groups that are made up of parents of children with autism. If your group has parents of children with a range of disabilities, the generic Signposts Program Adherence checklists would be more appropriate.

When you see 'Autism link' in these checklists refer to supplementary materials.

## Introduction and Your family as a team

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Welcome and outline of training program			
Introductions			
Housekeeping issues, mutual expectations			
Introduction			
Understanding autism – What is autism?			
Homework exercise			
Autism-related behaviours			
Understanding difficult behaviour			
How to use Signposts modules			
Refreshment break			
Your family as a team			
Speaking skills			
Listening skills			
Problem-solving skills			

## Module 1 – Measuring your child's behaviour

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Housekeeping issues			
Describing behaviour	Exercise 1A Scene 1.1 Exercise 1B Exercise 1C Exercise 1D		
Measuring behaviour	Scene 1.2 Scene 1.3 Exercise 1E Exercise 1F Exercise 1G		
Recording behaviour measurements			

## Module 2 (Part A) - Systematic use of daily interactions

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Welcome and report on homework tasks			
Setting Goal Achievement Scale (GAS) targets			
Identifying strengths Autism links: Communication, Self-esteem, Opportunity to generalise, User-friendly materials	Scene 2.1 Exercise 2A Exercise 2B Exercise 2C		
Triggers and consequences Autism links: Triggers, Consequences	Exercise 2D Exercise 2E Exercise 2F Scene 2.2 Scene 2.3		
How to record triggers and consequences			
Refreshment break			
Strengthening desirable behaviours			
Positive consequences: Labelled praise Autism links: Language; Favourite activity, Favourite foods, Sensory reinforcers, Removal of something unpleasant	Scene 2.4 Scene 2.5		

## Module 2 (Part B) – Systematic use of daily interactions

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Welcome and report on homework tasks			
Weakening undesirable behaviours Autism link: Patterns of behaviour	Exercise 1A Scene 1.1 Exercise 1B Exercise 1C Exercise 1D		
How to give effective instructions			
Giving instructions: Planning Autism links: Language, Use of visuals	Exercise 2I		
Giving effective instructions Autism links: Eye contact, Response time, Instant positive consequence	Scene 2.8 Scene 2.9 Scene 2.10  Role-play		
Giving 'stop' instructions Autism link: Language – visual	Scene 2.11 Scene 2.12		
Household rules Autism links: Expectations, Self-esteem, Displaying rules	Worksheet		

## Module 3 – Replacing difficult behaviour with useful behaviour

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Welcome and report on homework tasks			
Introduction to the purpose of behaviour			
How to give effective instructions			
Purpose of difficult behaviour Autism links: Gaining attention, Preferred activity, Physical pleasure, Different purposes			
Working out the purpose of the difficult behaviour	Exercise 3A Exercise 3B Exercise 3C		
Encouraging alternative behaviour Autism link: Purpose of behaviour	Scene 3.1 Scene 3.2		
Planned ignoring Autism link: Escalation trap	Scene 3.3 Scene 3.4		
Refreshment break			
Negative consequences – Physical punishment; Taking away privileges Autism link: Highly preferred	Exercise 3D		

## Module 3 – Replacing difficult behaviour with useful behaviour

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Time out Autism link: Being creative	Scene 3.5 Scene 3.6 Scene 3.7 Time out record sheet Role-play		
Selecting a specific strategy based on purpose of behaviour Autism link: Using visuals			
Using flow charts to select strategies			



## Module 4 – Planning for better behaviour

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Welcome and report on homework tasks			
Daily routines Autism links: Predictability, Consistent rules across households	Exercise 4A		
Planning for high-risk times Autism link: Changes and transitions	Exercise 4B		
Developing planned activities routine (PAR) Autism links: Visual material, Sensory stimulation, Physical prompts, Use positive language			
Implementing planned activities routine (PAR), Example of PAR Autism links: Using visuals, Concrete language, Shopping schedule, Other people, Finish successfully, Language	Scene 4.1 Scene 4.2 Scene 4.3 Scene 4.4 Scene 4.5 Exercise 4C		
PAR monitoring form			

## Module 5 – Developing more skills in your child

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Welcome and report on homework tasks			
Introduction to learning skills Autism link: Learning in chunks			
Teaching new skills Autism links: Learning strengths, Learning = change	Exercise 5A		
Writing objectives for teaching skills	Exercise 5B		
Breaking a skill into parts Autism link: Using schedules	Exercise 5C		
Teaching by showing	Scene 5.1		
Teaching step by step	Scene 5.2 Exercise 5D Scene 5.3		
Putting it all together	Exercise 5E Exercise 5F Exercise 5G		
Refreshment break			
Negotiating and liaising with your child's school			

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Selecting a school for your child Autism link: Needs to consider, Questions to ask			
Establishing regular communication			
Resolving difficulties	Exercise 5A		

## Dealing with stress in the family

Content	Covered	Time allocated	Time taken
Welcome and report on homework tasks			
Introduction to stress Autism link: Increased stress levels			
Understanding stress	Stress exercise A Stress exercise B		
Managing stress			
Using relaxations skills			
Changing your thinking			
Setting homework			

## Resources

In addition to the *Signposts for building better behaviour* resources there are many services and resources that can enhance your understanding of autism spectrum disorders. These services are also useful for parents.

The Parent Resources include contact details for these services, as well as:

- » Bedtime schedule
- » Shopping schedule

[See Parent Resources for more details.](#)

# Acknowledgements and Contributors

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