

TIP SHEET

Developing Appropriate Coping Skills in Children with Autism

Children on the autism spectrum very often have developed a set of behaviors that help them to cope with the effects of their disorder. They may exhibit a variety of behaviors that assist them in understanding the world around them. These behaviors serve a variety of purposes including:

- To protect the child from an overwhelming stimulation
- To intensify sensory input to a level they can feel
- To meet the individual's wants or needs
- To organize or make sense of their environment

While these behaviors are functionally necessary, they can also be disruptive. Because these behaviors serve such a critical function for the child, the goal is to try and develop more functional and appropriate behaviors rather than to eliminate or extinguish the behavior.

Some common coping behaviors include:

- Self-isolation
- Biting and or motor stimulation
- Repetitive patterns in play, communication and familiar daily events
- Vocal stimulation (humming, echolalia self talk, whistling)
- Intense attachment to favored objects
- Excessive avoidance or intense seeking of particular sensory experience

Developing skills

To decrease the less functional and inappropriate behaviors one must try to increase the child's ability to accept comfort or assistance from a significant adult and increase the child's number of coping strategies. These strategies include seeking help, increasing use of language, taking a break, defining needs and including a diet of sensory input. To assist in increasing the coping skills the following ideas are recommended:

- Allow time for delayed processing when communicating with the child. Read the child's cues to be sure the information was understood.
- Practice coping strategies during play so the child can learn strategies before she or he is promoted to use them in a challenging situation.
- Organize input. Limit extraneous noise, movement and materials to help the child learn to focus on relevant information and screen out the rest.
- Increase structure and predictability of activities by using organizing phrases such as "First, Then", or "Ready, Set, Go".
- Provide adult support and modeling for appropriate social interactions with peers.
- Define space with chairs, carpet squares, bean bags, etc, to help the child feel safe when in proximity to peers.
- Provide clear, visual information about routine and novel events.

These tips were compiled from a variety of sources. For more tip sheets, visit www.fraser.org.