



## TIP SHEET

# Developing Appropriate Coping Skills in Children with Autism

Children with autism or pervasive developmental disorder 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.

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