

# WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD IS OUT OF CONTROL

Children and adults with Autism can occasionally have behaviours that are simply beyond your (and their) control. If a child or adult is having a tantrum, the recommended intervention is ignoring the behaviour by not looking at, talking to, or touching the person (except for safety). And this will usually help to reduce tantrums over time because the tantrum is no longer receiving attention nor is it getting the person any real benefit.

However, there are some things you cannot ignore. What about a tantrum that lasts all day and night and involves hitting others and breaking things? In other words, what most of us refer to as a 'meltdown'! For little children, we may intervene physically and stop these things from happening. But every "child" reaches an age or size when that no longer is an option. In addition, an elderly parent, grandparent or foster parent etc., may be no match for even a young but strong child. This article is about what can be done when things are out of control and something needs to be done.

At these times it really doesn't help to be told: "I told you that you'd better get his behaviour under control when he was three years old!" While that may be a true statement, it will not help - so - moving on.....

The behaviour referred to here is NOT a tantrum. It is behaviour that puts the person with Autism and others at risk of harm. The behaviour has moved to the point of being potentially criminal. The person is trying to hurt others or is so out of control that hurting others and breaking the house up no longer matters to him or her. It is behaviour that, if done by a stranger to your home, you would call the police without hesitation!

## DEALING WITH OUT OF CONTROL BEHAVIOR

Let's look at some steps (from least to most intrusive and serious) that you can take to defuse and/or deal with the situation.

### Stop intervening

By this time, you have probably tried talking calmly to the person, yelling at the person, restraining the person, etc. If these things have not worked up to this point - stop doing them.

Do not talk to the person, stare at the person (watch them in your peripheral vision), or touch the person (except for safety). These steps may not calm the person down but they will take away some of the fuel to their out of control behaviour. When a person is attacking you, you have the right to defend yourself. This is best achieved through defensive and blocking moves. If you have not attended a non-violent self-defence or a crisis intervention program, it is highly recommended.

It is recommended not to restrain the person for a few reasons:

- Some people like restraints and will have tantrums in order to be restrained
- A restraint is a temporary solution and teaches nothing about self-control
- It is too easy to harm another person when in restraint unless you are very well trained

If you must restrain for the safety of others, do so with only the force necessary and then release when the others are safely out of the way (eg., other children). Remember, if you have been ignoring the person's behaviour, the person may become more belligerent in demanding your attention. If that happens:

## Walk away and get to a safe place

Sometimes the mere presence of another person sets off the person with Autism. If you can safely leave the person where they are, do so. Make sure you have access to a phone so you can call for help if needed. Go to a bathroom or bedroom where you can lock the door but still hear what is going on. Listen for signs of calming. Do not come out immediately, but after five minutes of calm, step out and assess what the situation is.

If all is well, carry on as if nothing unusual had happened. This is not the time for talking about what happened, for setting consequences, for yelling, or anything else but continued calm. When the person is truly calm (possibly even the next day), you can discuss how the incident could have been avoided - but not while emotions are still raw. It is very important for you to remain calm even if you are scared to death inside. You can fall apart later than the person can't see.

## Getting help

This step actually may precede the previous ones. If you know of someone who can usually calm the person with Autism down, call him/her and ask this person to come over and help. If possible, it is always better to have the numeric advantage over a person who is out of control. Sometimes that in itself can defuse the situation. If they can person come - turn the situation over to them. You become the 'back-up' at that point.

This is only a short-term solution though. The person with Autism needs to find a way to communicate frustration, anger, and other emotions without resorting to violence. When things are calm, talk to their helper and see what can be done to help the person calm down without outside intervention. Simple steps like teaching the person to tell someone when they are angry or upset, teaching a deep-breathing relaxation exercise to the person, or telling the person to count to ten can all be helpful. These things will have to be taught another day but can be very constructive for those that can do any or all of them.

Using a social story that talks about dealing with anger can be helpful. In the social story you can also discuss the natural consequences for violent behaviour, which may include involving the police, a stay in the hospital etc. Try and talk to a behaviour specialist or psychologist about a plan to help the person with Autism deal with their anger in a peaceful way. Then teach it consistently and regularly - don't wait for the next crisis.

## Police, security staff or case managers

If things are not calming down and you have no back-up person to help, you may need to call the police or an on-call staff person (for those of you in a case management situation).

Let's discuss calling the police. Natural consequences are often the best teacher in many situations. The natural consequence for a person who is hurting you and tearing up your house is for the police to intervene. This is a drastic step for many parents. None of us want our kids to have a criminal record and none of us want outsiders dealing with our family issues. However, a person who gets violent changes all those wishes for privacy. Their behaviour **demand**s an intervention.

If you have a child or adult with Autism who has had even one episode of violence in their past, it would be a good idea to call the police when everything is calm and talk to them about your situation. Tell the police about your child, about Autism, and about what you would want them to do if you called in a crisis. Explain what a typical crisis is and what steps from them would be helpful. Some people are so intimidated by the police that they immediately calm down. Their presence may be enough to defuse the situation. The police should be able to "flag" your home on their system with the information you give them.

You know your child/adult with Autism better than anyone. You know what their reaction may be to the police arriving. If the person will look at this as a positive thing, it may not be a good idea for the police to come at all if all they will do is visit. This actually may reinforce the crisis behaviour. If that is the case but the police are still needed - make sure you talk to them about how to handle the situation.

Perhaps you need them to transport your person with Autism to a medical facility for an evaluation or to a crisis intervention program (if you're fortunate to have one locally). This will be a different outcome from what they expect. Many police will have a hard time being "typical police" with a person with a disability. When you call, explain what you want - if you do not want them babying your person with Autism, tell them that (of course, they do not need to use excessive force but tell them you just don't want them to be nice). The key to a police visit is that it is such an outrageous and negative experience for the person that they do not wish for it to be repeated, ever.

**Do not** warn or threaten the person with the police. Prior to this incident, you have already told him or her that violent behaviour could lead to the police coming to the home. When you are alone in your "safe" room, call the police, explain the situation, and what you would like for them to do. They will tell you what they can and can't do - that is beyond your control - so do not worry about it. Wait for the police to arrive and then come out of your room to let them in. Let the police deal with your child/adult with Autism from that point on. Do not intervene and ask them to be nicer, etc. (unless they are clearly using excessive force). The police may be able to calm the situation enough so they can leave and all will be well.

The fact that you did not warn your person with Autism that the police were coming may be a great deterrent for future violent behaviour - he or she will never know when they may show up. Normally, the police will not treat a person with disabilities as a criminal. Typically, they will not take him to jail. However, if they witness an assault or other crime, they may have little choice but to take the person to jail.

If charges are brought against your child or adult with autism, it is not the end of the world. If the person is habitually violent - then it may actually be a good thing to have the behaviour on record. The disposition of the case may include additional services to help curb his aggression or hospitalisation. Most of the time, the police will be transporting the person to a hospital emergency room for an evaluation by a psychiatrist. Often, if things have calmed down, the psychiatrist will release the person to your custody and schedule a follow-up visit with his physician or a mental health facility.

Sometimes, especially if the person is still violent or if you demand it, the person will be sent to a secure hospital for an evaluation. Frequently all that occurs is the person is observed and sometimes medicated or the medications are adjusted. Don't expect a miraculous clinical breakthrough in this short stay. This is most often just another unpleasant experience for your person with Autism - but it is one **he or she** caused. The end result will be that you have hopefully taught your child/adult with Autism this important lesson: "I will not be hit and this is how I will handle it every time you hit me (or tear up the house, etc.)."

### **Transporting your child or adult with Autism to the hospital yourself**

Sometimes the police will not cooperate, or you have determined that you do not wish to involve the police for some other reason. Transporting a child or adult with Autism who is in a crisis is not a task for the faint of heart and it should not be done alone. An out-of-control person in a car is a recipe for disaster - please do not attempt this alone. You may be able to call an ambulance or even a cab to transport. At least in those situations you will be free to restrain the person if necessary.

If you must transport the person to a hospital or other program, you will need help. Prior to this step you should identify someone in your family or circle of friends who is fearless, physically large and fit, and will agree to come with you and supervise the person with Autism in this situation. Call them and tell them to come over immediately for the transport. Depending upon the size and/or strength of your child/adult with autism, you may need to arrange two people for this task. Do not tell your child/adult what you are up to. When the person arrives, let them take over with your child/adult and go to prepare the car. Tell the person to come when you honk the horn.

Prepare the car by opening the rear passenger door behind the driver, get behind the wheel, lock all the other doors (using child locks where possible), start the car and honk the horn. The helper(s) bring the person with Autism to the car. If there are two people, have the first slide into the car and sit on the far side. The second person places the person with autism into the car and gets in beside them and shuts the door. If you have to say, "Come on, let's go get an ice cream" - do it if it will gain cooperation - at some point in the future (when they are calm) you can, indeed, go get ice cream - so it won't be a complete lie. We are talking about safety here and that trumps any "white lie".

Go directly to the hospital or other facility. The person who is helping you can restrain if necessary and most of all protect you so you can drive safely. Call ahead so the hospital or facility knows you are coming and may even have someone meet you at the car. When you arrive, take the person with Autism into the facility and the hospitalisation information above should be followed.

by Gary J. Heffner

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It is NEVER easy to deal with a child/person with aggressive behaviour, let alone during a 'meltdown' where that are often beyond their OWN control. And certainly no one wants to involve outside bodies (such as the police etc).

But it is VITAL to see the 'bigger picture' in these situations! You love your child! You MAY be the only one who can realistically look after them. But if YOU are incapacitated (or worse!) by their violence, who is going to care for them then?! If the police etc are needed – then so be it! Pride is **NO** excuse! Pride does not resolve anything or fix broken bones and homes.

One thing is certain – if you know your child is capable of such behaviour – planning ahead is ESSENTIAL. The article above will at least have (hopefully) given you food for thought in how to go about it AND what to do in an emergency?! It certainly doesn't provide the answer to every situation.