



# Shopping: strategies to help

Trips to the shops can be stressful experiences for your child with Autism and the rest of your family. Here, we provide you with some strategies to help reduce some of the difficulties.

## Possible triggers at the shops

Children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can have difficulties processing the different sensations we all experience in the environment on a daily basis. This can be because children on the spectrum can either be hypo-sensitive (under sensitive) to sensory input in the environment, or hyper-sensitive (over sensitive) (for more information, please look up the various sensory links we have on our Knowledge Base page). This in turn can lead to behavioural difficulties.

Researchers have suggested that behaviour such as 'flapping', 'twirling' etc., may help produce endorphins to calm children down, or in the case of tantrums, head banging etc, to overload the system, resulting in a 'shut down'. It could also be that the child is trying to escape from what they consider to be a confusing or stressful situation and they are trying to ask for help.

Below are some suggestions as to why a child may have particular difficulty whilst shopping. It is by no means an exhaustive list.

### Sounds

Children with an ASD can have difficulty filtering out what other people may barely notice - background noise. One person with Autism notes how they find it difficult to distinguish between foreground and background noise, and Temple Grandin refers to her hearing as being permanently turned up to maximum. For example, if you take a moment to pay attention to all the sounds that occur in the supermarket you will become aware of people talking, tills beeping, the tannoy system, babies crying etc.

Imagine all those noises being heard at the same volume. This would be unbearable for anyone to endure, and could easily be what a child with an ASD experiences. Added to this, many noises such as the announcements over a tannoy system are sudden loud noises and unpredictable.

### Smells

Children with an ASD can become overwhelmed with subtle smells you may not even notice such as someone's perfume or, in the shops, strong odours such as those coming from the fish, meat or perfume counters.

You may find that certain areas of the shop can cause the child to become upset and it could be a certain scent is causing distress. Other children find it difficult to distinguish between different smells and they may be overwhelmed by all the different scents in the shop. If you think about how overwhelming the scents of lots of different perfumes when you are in a big department store. This could be the experience your child is having in any shop.

## **Visual**

Children with ASD may also experience problems visually. Fluorescent, flickering lights or reflecting light may hurt the child's eyes or possibly mesmerise them, which could rapidly become very confusing. There are many different objects to focus on in a shop and changing patterns appear in rows or on shelves. A child with an ASD can have difficulty focusing on only one or two objects and may feel overwhelmed by this complex environment, experiencing 'visual overload'.

## **Touch**

Some children with an ASD may also be very sensitive to touch. This can cause difficulty for children if they are trying on new clothes or shoes. Certain fabrics which to you may seem very soft and comfortable may be intolerable for your child to touch. If your child insists on wearing something that you think inappropriate, such as a heavy winter coat in summer, it may be that he/she is getting some positive sensory feedback from either the fabric or the weight of the clothing.

## **Lack of understanding**

Unless it has previously been explained or demonstrated to a child, it can be very hard for him/her to understand even the basic need to go to the shops. They may not realise that we all have to shop. This can lead to frustration and stress which may be shown through behavioural difficulties.

Some children may not understand that a visit to the shops has an end point and they may need visual prompts to help remind them. It may also be difficult for a child to understand why we do certain activities when we are out shopping. For example, why do we try on different clothes or shoes in some shops and not in others?

Other children may find it difficult to understand why they have been told not to take their clothes off when they are not at home but then are expected to when they are in the changing room in a department store. They may even find it difficult to understand why people are trying to get them to try on clothes or shoes that do not belong to them.

## **Invasion of personal space**

Especially in crowded supermarkets and busy department stores, it can become confusing and frightening for a child with an ASD to be in an environment with so many people.

## **Strategies to overcome these difficulties**

### **Diary**

When trying to understand any behaviour, it can be useful to start by using a behaviour diary to try and identify which triggers may be causing the behaviour as it can be easier to then identify some possible solutions. For example, if behaviour persists in certain areas of the shop, keeping a diary may help to determine any potential environmental triggers in those areas, such as particular smells. Also note what time of day and day of the week you go shopping. Are some days/times better than others? Instead of going on a busy Saturday morning, would it be possible to go earlier in the week? If you find shoe or clothes shopping particularly difficult then it may be useful to keep a sensory diary to see if there are particular colours, fabrics or shoes your child finds difficult to tolerate.

### **Preparation**

There are a number of ways in which you can prepare a child for a shopping trip and thus reduce some of the confusion and frustration. This can be done either by showing a child a photograph of the shop you are going to before getting in the car or having a symbol on a daily timetable. Some children find it difficult to understand why we have to go shopping. There are books which may help explain the event or you may find it useful to write a Social Story about the trip. Social stories can be helpful when explaining not only why an event occurs, but also what is expected of a person when they go there. Below is an example of a Social Story explaining why we go to the supermarket based on a story on going to the grocery:

“Sometimes we go to the supermarket. My Mum or Dad may go with me. We go to the supermarket to buy food. My Mum or Dad knows what food we need. Before we leave the supermarket we will go to the checkout. The checkout is important. This is where we give the cashier money. The money pays for the food.”

It may be useful to write a social story if there is a specific aspect of the shopping trip that your child appears to have difficulty understanding, such as trying on new clothes or shoes. For example, writing a story about why it is ok to try on different clothes in the changing rooms at a shop but not anywhere else.

Some children may identify going to particular shops with a particular route. It is important that either you keep to this route or take alternatives as much as possible so that your child does not get confused if you do then have to follow a diversion.

Your child may find it useful to act out trips at home to help prepare them. Many shops sell toys that can help. There is also computer software which reinforces life skills at a more general level.

It may also be a good idea to provide rules of how to behave in a shop, giving positive instructions ie 'In the supermarket I can do x'. For some children it may be possible to arrive at the rules together and sign a 'contract'. For others, an outside authority setting the rules can be more effective. Perhaps a shop manager or cashier could talk to your child. It may be possible to incorporate social skills training into the visit for older children for example teaching about the value of money and how to pay.

### **Visual support**

Many children with an ASD find visual support easier to process than spoken communication and visual prompts may help them understand the different steps in a visit, or to help remind them that there will be a point when the shopping trip will finish. There are a number of visual prompts that can be used:

#### **Now and Next Board**

Having a now and next board (with a picture of a shop as 'now' and a photograph of what you are doing next) which you carry around the shop may help the child understand that there will be a point when the shopping trip will end.

#### **Timetable**

You may find that having a visual timetable of all the different steps in the shopping trip may help increase your child's understanding of what is happening. Some children may prefer to have every step shown to them; others may need only one or two steps.

#### **Lists**

Having a small shopping list in visual form can help to keep a child on task. Try to think of things that are spread out around the shop or if you are going into a couple of shops, items in each shop, so the child does not find everything at once but is involved in the task for as long as possible.

There are a number of websites where you can print off free symbols for timetables and shopping.

#### **Stress scales**

Visual support can also be used to help a child identify to an adult when they are beginning to feel frustrated or stressed. This could be a help card in their pocket which can be brought out to show the adult when they are finding the situation difficult to cope with. A stress scale such as a 'traffic light system' where green is 'I'm fine', and red is 'I need help' can help a child show an adult how they are feeling and may help the adult to decide how well the child is coping.

#### **Equipment**

If your child does have difficulty processing light or noise, earmuffs, a music player with headphones or earplugs can help cut out external noise or give your child one particular sound to focus on. Humming can help a child to focus on one noise as well. Sunglasses can help a child to process light and cut out some of the brightness and flickering. Baseball caps can also be useful as they not only block out some light but can also reduce the level of noise your child hears as well.

Members of the public can often increase stress levels for both yourself and your child by misinterpreting your child's behaviour. Carrying information on Autism to give people when you are out can reduce misunderstanding on their part and hopefully lead to a less stressful experience for you. There are different cards that you can buy to hand out or of course you can create your own.

Children with ASD often have difficulty in understanding danger. If they find the environment difficult, they may try and run out of the shop. Others will not have an awareness of potential hazards such as those in a busy car park. As a result some parents will use equipment to warn them when their child has run away, as well as giving their child identity tags should they become separated from their parent(s). Timers

Some children on the spectrum will have general difficulties in processing. If your child is young you may need to build up his/her tolerance of such an environment. Taking your child on short trips for one item, or for a couple of minutes at a time, may help him/her to gradually learn to cope. Starting in your local corner shop and building up to a supermarket may also help. Alternatively, having a timer so the child can see how much longer he/she will be in the environment may reduce the stress of the situation.

### **Distracters**

Having a comforter or a toy to distract the child can also help. For some children this may just be a small familiar object for them to fiddle with in their pocket. For other children, channelling their interest may help them to focus and ignore everything else that is going on in the shop. For example, how many pictures of Thomas the Tank Engine can you find in the shop?

### **Shoe shopping**

Shoe shopping can be particularly difficult for children if they find it difficult to tolerate certain types of shoes or if they do not understand why they need to go shoe shopping. Some strategies have been mentioned that may help you to overcome some of these difficulties. There are also a number of websites which provide information on measuring your children's feet at home so you are able to buy shoes without them having to be present.

### **Department stores**

Some shops, especially the larger department stores, have got facilities for people with disabilities such as larger changing rooms or personal shoppers as well as telephone and internet shopping. If there are particular shops that you know you will be making repeated trips to, it may be worth contacting the shop to see what kind of provision and facilities they can offer you and your family.

### **Rewards**

When you have had a successful trip, you may find that rewarding your child afterwards reinforces good behaviour. This can be done in a number of ways: getting a sticker, five minutes watching their favourite video or a small treat, for example. It is important to give this reward soon after the event so that your child can learn to make the association between the trip and the reward.

### **Post shopping trip**

It is also important to note that your child may need some calm time after over stimulation. They may need to wind down in the car or the house afterwards. If you think this is the case, it is important to let the child wind down before asking them to do anything or go anywhere else that may increase their stress levels again.

As the child becomes more tolerant of such environments, it may be possible to slowly build up his tolerance by going to two shops, then three. However, for some children, they will need time out afterwards to reduce their stress levels.