

COMPASS Information Series:

Relaxation / Calming for Young Children with Autism

Children with autism are often anxious and appear nervous. They react quickly and sometimes seem to blow-up rapidly. When they are very upset they often have trouble calming themselves down. Starting when they are young to help them learn to relax, stay calm, and calm themselves when they feel upset will help them throughout their lives. They have to rely on the adults who understand them to teach them and help them practice relaxation and calming activities and routines.

What contributes to their anxiety and frustration?

A number of factors contribute. They perceive the world differently and are trying to understand verbal language, social interactions, and sensory information that is often overwhelming and impossible to translate into action. They may sense that people around them are upset with them or at least they are conditioned that a No or Don't means someone is going to intervene. There are many triggers to their blow-ups. It seems that in certain situations they are tense a great deal of the times, therefore small things may be intolerable.

What helps them become less tense and anxious?

Supportive people and environments where they learn the expectations and routines and are being supported to interact and communicate are needed. They need to build trust. However, they also need the opportunity and experience of functioning in a rather complex world. They will be confronted with situations that make them tense and anxious. We try to understand what these are and provide the desensitization, supports, and help that they need to succeed. However, that isn't always possible. Learning to communicate, to wait, to take turns, to interact, to tolerate some difficult environments, to accept changes and that some things aren't possible, and to be around groups of people requires a great deal of adaptation for many children with autism.

Do they develop ways to relax and cope?

Many children with autism do. They may pace, rock, bite on things, roll up in something, put their hands over their ears, close their eyes, go into a corner or small space, go off by themselves, listen to music, watch familiar videos, or ask to go for a ride. Some of their preferred methods may not be accessible to them all the time or at the moment not be allowed. We always have to understand what their needs are and consider how to accommodate these within their day, while at the same time encouraging learning and social interaction.

How can relaxing, less demanding activities be built into the child's day?

Naming the times as relaxation time, quiet time, or be calm time helps the child have a label for his feeling at this time. These times can be built in at home or at school. Most children with autism need the opportunity to have these times at school. They can be as short or as long and as frequent as each child needs. For each child these will be different. This time may be sitting in a corner of the classroom with headphones on listening to music, rocking in a rocking chair, and looking at a book. For another child this might be walking laps around the gym, rolling on a mat, and getting a drink. The relaxing time

should be associated with activities done in a certain place with a label given to them. Some children with autism can participate in a group relaxation time, if it is individualized enough.

How can relaxation and calming be taught to children with autism?

Occupational therapies are good sources of ideas for development of relaxation activities and routines. The Groden Institute has tapes and books available for more ideas. However, each child needs an individualized approach. Using visual information to cue the child through a routine or as cues to engage in the routine works well. A routine should be transportable and be able to be done wherever the child happens to be. A student can be guided through or can model the adult who is teaching the routine. Whatever method is used the goal is to have the child be able to access this method across people and settings. The child needs to practice several times a day when she is not upset with the same cues being used. In this way it becomes routine and can be accessed when the child feels upset or anxious with the learned cues. Some children might do well following a video, but the child has to learn to do the routine without the video so it can be used everywhere.

Some activities that might be taught and built into a routine are deep breaths with shoulders going up and down and blowing, squeezing something and letting go, reaching to the side or straight out then putting arms down, rubbing arms upwards, closing eyes, pushing against something then moving back, and bending down from the waist and swinging arms. These can be used in any combination. Sometimes children are given something to bite on or carry something to put in their mouths.

An Example of Individualization

Cue is given, "Relax Time," a picture and or written information can be presented or a certain object can be the cue. Child sits across from the adult, either on a chair or on the floor. You want to practice varied ways so this can be accessed anywhere. The steps of the routine should be in visual form and the adult models.

- Breathe in with shoulders going up, lower shoulders and blow out. Do three times and count.
- Bend at waist slowly and put Head down, sit up. Do three times and count.
- Raise hands up over head and wiggle fingers. Do three times and count.
- Repeat several times until calm.
- Label what the child has done. "You did your relax time. You feel better."

As a routine is learned and practiced enough the child will be able to access it easier, even when upset. The goal will be for the child to be able to access it independently and add his own ideas to it as he gets older. However, don't expect this for some time. If the child can go through the routine with the established cues, instead of becoming upset, a great deal has been learned.

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