

Module 8 : Best Practices when Supporting Autistic Individuals

- How to ensure a safe environment at all times
- Creating a safety plan for an autistic individual
- Practical and sensible considerations for home, school, and the community
- Various visual strategies for autistic individuals

In this module, we will look at some best practices when supporting people on the autism spectrum, including:

- How to ensure a safe environment at all times
- Creating a safety plan
- Practical and sensible considerations for home, school, and the community
- Various visual strategies
- Aspects of non-verbal communication

8.1 Ensuring a Safe Environment at all Times

Safety is an incredibly important issue when supporting autistic people.

While there are numerous practical aspects of ensuring safety, an autism-friendly environment, whether at home or school, can also have other positive ramifications for people on the autism spectrum.

Because autism often makes the world seem like a confusing, scary and overwhelming place, having a home that's safe and laid out appropriately can offer the opportunity to feel reassured and protected.

Safety and risk concerns are common for families with autistic children; therefore, it's important to make related practices a part of everyday life. Safety must be considered not just at home and at school, but also out in the community.

To minimise risk, it's important to be proactive and incorporate safety and risk reduction into an autistic child's daily routine. Furthermore, planning a detailed response for possible emergencies is also essential.

The following are some quick pointers regarding safety.

Do:

- Review and secure your home or classroom at school
- Specifically address the common autism-related issue of "wandering"
- If necessary, contact local law enforcement to ensure they're aware of a potential "wanderer"
- Create an emergency contact form for all key people to have at hand
- Develop an autism safety action plan and involve key individuals in its creation

- Individual risk assessments are strongly advised especially in educational settings (offsite risks should also be considered).

Don't:

- Overlook the importance of an autistic person having identification such as a medical bracelet or temporary tattoo
- Forget to alert neighbours in advance if you have a child who makes attempts to wander
- Forget to keep accurate and up-to-date records of contacts and other vital information
- Underestimate safety as an essential part of the daily routine for an autistic person.

Safety at home may involve installing locks on doors, windows, cupboards, appliances, sheds and gates. This is essential, both to prevent wandering and restrict access to places or items which could be harmful to an autistic child. Chemicals, tools, electrical outlets and appliances may all be potential points of interest that can cause considerable harm.

Wandering is a serious issue for many autistic children, who are often attracted to water, like ponds and lakes.

Safety in the community also naturally comes into consideration when wandering is an issue. It has the potential to lead to high-risk confrontations with law enforcement or other individuals who may not understand the actions or behaviour of an autistic individual, or who may not be able to communicate with the person effectively.

Sexual safety is one aspect of this that is not often discussed and can be difficult for some autistic individuals to comprehend. However, it remains extremely important as studies have shown that autistic children and those with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be abused than typically developing children. This may in part be because children on the autism spectrum cannot perceive victimisation or are unable to communicate that something has happened to them.

It is important to teach autistic children about sexual safety, as their peers are typically taught in school. Part of this education will have to include direct instruction on when and where it is appropriate to be naked and when and where it is not. Use simple, direct language, the appropriate names for the body and specific body parts, visual cues, and other clear, effective communication.

These teachings may have to be reinforced multiple times, but they will help to keep the child safe should they wander in the community. As mentioned earlier, Social Stories are particularly useful in

these situations.

There are also wider issues to consider, such as road safety and access to dangerous areas throughout the community. These can be worrying enough for typically developing children, but especially so for children on the autism spectrum.

8.2 Creating an Autism Safety Plan

Safety plans for autistic individuals involve identifying potential risks and putting systems in place to reduce or eliminate potential risks.

The best advocates for setting up such a plan are the autistic individual's family, school staff, support workers, and medical professionals. Other key people involved may include close neighbours, friends and extended family. Anyone who has daily or regular contact with the individual should be consulted.

To start developing a safety plan, understanding what will keep the individual safe must be carefully evaluated. This may include taking precautions at home, such as placing locks on doors and windows. Remember, taking preventative measures is what will ensure the wellbeing of the autistic person.

Preparing emergency information should be the next step in creating the autism safety plan. This will include creating a detailed emergency contact sheet, which will be covered in more detail in the next section. Emergency information should always be available to the appropriate people who have contact with the individual at home, in the neighbourhood, at school, and out in the community.

For the autistic individual, it can also include corresponding information on a clothing tag or medical identification bracelet.

When preparing a safety plan, ensure you have the following aspects covered:

- Know whether the autistic individual tends to wander, run away, or attempt to get out at night
- Ensure that the home, classroom, and places for community activities have been evaluated for their safety and that reasonable preventative measures have been put in place to protect autistic individuals
- Ensure that the individual always wears their identification bracelet or tag
- Speak to neighbours and others in the community about the individual and inform them what to do if he or she is seen wandering or in a place of potential danger, such as near a lake
- Meet with school staff to ensure safety skills and measures are in place
- Contact local police and emergency services to make them aware of the autistic person, and how they can help.

8.3 Practical and Sensible Considerations

There are many practical considerations that can be undertaken to help ensure the safety of people on the autism spectrum.

These are often practical in nature and easy to implement.

While some families may hesitate to put locks and barriers in place at home, the safety of an autistic child must be paramount. Double locks with keys and chains and window locks are essential to reduce the risk of wandering.

Keep an emergency contact form at home and in commonly visited areas such as with family, friends, and at school.

The form can be circulated to teachers, support workers, trusted neighbours, and family members. An emergency contact form should contain the child's name, photograph, personal description, address, and all relevant contact information for family members, carers, and doctors.

It should also indicate whether the child has any sensory or dietary restrictions, their favourite attractions, and locations that they may wander to, as well as likes and dislikes.

It is also important that the emergency contact form lists atypical behaviours and characteristics of the child, which are likely to attract attention in the community. It can even include instructions on how to approach the child, which techniques to use for de-escalation, and methods of communication the child uses, such as sign language or visual cues.

Finally, the emergency contact sheet should have a map that indicates nearby water and a blueprint or drawing of the child's home that indicates which bedroom is theirs. While these instructions may seem extreme, they can be vital to protect the wellbeing of an autistic child who wanders off.

Safety considerations should also be applied to other autistic behaviours besides wandering. Around the home, modifications can be made to the primary living areas, such as the child's bedroom, bathroom, play area, kitchen and garden. These are areas that should be looked at first before expanding to the rest of the house.

For example,

If an autistic person is inclined to throw, break, sweep, or otherwise hit out at objects when they feel frustrated, then access may be limited to potentially dangerous or breakable items.

Because autistic children don't understand the potential ramifications of their behaviour, natural curiosity may attract them to everything from toilets, hot taps, washing machines, matches, lighters, and garden tools. All, of course, have the potential to cause serious harm if not kept out of sight and reach.

All electrical outlets and appliances should be made safe, and child locks may be useful for doors, drawers, windows, and the oven. Baby gates can also be employed to help restrict access to certain areas, especially if falls are a concern. In the bath, toys may need to be limited at times in order to prevent power struggles and the possibility of drowning or injury.

If necessary, appropriate seating can be put in place at the dining table, such as chairs with wrap-around arms. Wrap-around desks at home or in school may also prove useful and prevent throwing, knocking items over, self-stimulation, or acts of aggression.

It is essential to remember that the top safety risks for people on the autism spectrum include:

- Wandering
- Pica, the act of putting inedible items into the mouth or eating them
- Gaining access to household toxins.
- Drowning

8.4 Visual Strategies

Other ideas for ensuring safety in the home or school can include making visual labels on functional items throughout the room. This will help explain to an autistic child what they do or what they are used for, and the acceptable behaviour associated with such.

Because many autistic people are such visual learners, this can be a highly effective method of communicating important information which they can process and incorporate into their daily lives.

One visual strategy is to arrange furniture more logically to best suit the individual. This may include moving decorative items that can be easily broken or ensuring that sofas and tables are placed in a way that they are easily accessed but difficult to climb on to gain access to other areas.

Furniture with sharp edges or potentially dangerous features, such as glass coffee tables, may need to be reconsidered and replaced with safer items. This is especially important if an autistic child is prone to falling, climbing or crawling.

Rooms should be free of cluttered items that can potentially be tripped over, broken or used inappropriately. Clutter can also contribute greatly to sensory overstimulation in autistic individuals, and a clean, well-organised environment may feel considerably calmer and safe.

Functional items needed on a daily basis can also be organised out of the way into see-through containers and with visual labels that explain what is inside and what the items are used for. In general, organisation and adherence to safety, order and structure are all essential in designing a home that is safe and visually appropriate for a person on the autism spectrum.

Other visual strategies can include the creation of charts and images such as a First-Then Board. This is a visual display that will help autistic individuals understand what will happen after completing tasks or inform them of the dangers involved with touching off-limits items or accessing restricted areas.

A First-Then Board is especially useful for those who struggle with receptive language skills or for encouraging the completion of tasks the person doesn't like to do.

Another visual strategy is the creation of a schedule which uses pictures to represent what will happen throughout each day of the week, especially within specific tasks and activities. In the next module, we will cover more about how items like visual schedules can be imperative in helping autistic individuals stay organised.

Another strategy is to visually set parameters to establish boundaries regarding participation in activities and expected basic behaviours such as waiting.

For example

Visual parameters can be used to communicate physical boundaries, indicate when it's not the appropriate time to eat, play with a certain toy or use the computer. They can also communicate information such as how many juice boxes are in the fridge or treats are in the cupboard. Some visual parameters may include signs such as a "not available" picture or a "stop" sign. Others may simply be pieces of paper that are attached to the juice boxes in the fridge.

Employing various visual strategies is essential for setting limits and developing appropriate behaviours and routines. Typically, they may decrease anxiety and make it easier for autistic individuals to understand what's happening in the day and what the expectations are of them.

While visual strategies, like any other, may initially be met with challenging behaviour, consistency is key. Using a consistent approach will convey an understanding that this is part of the routine. Visual strategies may also be more easily adopted if compliance is met with positive reinforcement, such as the opportunity to play with a favourite toy, have a small treat, or get a sticker on a chore chart.

8.5 Intervention Techniques to Teach Safety

Many of these methods to ensure a safe environment can be translated to the classroom or other places an autistic child visits, and parents or specialists can speak with teachers, coaches and others about preventing wandering or other potentially harmful behaviours.

Autistic children can also be worked with to adhere to safety and make it part of their daily routine.

For example

Stories can be used to prevent curiosity about fire or encourage trust in law enforcement.

Intervention techniques can also be introduced, and appropriate, safe behaviour can be instilled in children on the autism spectrum.

Intervention techniques used to teach safety to autistic children may include social stories, visual rules, signs, and charts such as the First-Then Board, structured schedules (visual schedules if necessary), reinforcing safe behaviour, and implementing consequences for unsafe behaviour.

When implementing intervention techniques, consistency is vital. Used effectively, these can be excellent additions to making modifications around the home or classroom.

These techniques can also be altered or phased out over time once the autistic individual has demonstrated the ability to adhere to safety, use good judgment, and understand what is expected of him or her.

In the meantime, adhering to safety using methods such as locks, specialised furniture and restricted access, may be necessary to ensure the safety of a child on the autism spectrum.

8.6 Safety in GP's Surgeries, Hospitals and other Medical Facilities

While many medical professionals are appropriately trained to recognise autism, unfortunately, there are still incidents where the condition is not properly understood, and inappropriate strategies are used.

When attending appointments, whether it be a routine blood test or a hospital appointment for surgery, it is essential that everyone who will be interacting with the individual understands that he or she is autistic. It is also important that the primary traits of that person's condition, such as behaviours or methods of communication, are understood.

While it seems fairly uncommon, there have been reported incidents in the UK and around the world where autistic children recovering from anaesthesia or experiencing anxiety and exhibiting challenging behaviour have been treated inappropriately or harshly by those who don't understand that he or she has a recognised condition and is not merely intending to be difficult.

8.7 Aspects of Non-Verbal Communication and their Role in Supporting Autistic People

When people on the autism spectrum are not able to use expressive language, it is important to remember that this does not mean that they also lack receptive language.

Language is about much more than just words, and autistic people can use a variety of other methods to communicate if they are pre- or non-verbal.

Even when autistic individuals aren't able to verbalise, they are still capable of conveying their interests, wants, and needs. It must never be assumed that someone on the autism spectrum doesn't or can't listen to what is being said. Just because the person isn't verbal, it doesn't mean that it is appropriate to talk past them and only consult with parents or carers.

Non-verbal communication supports autistic people with language and provides them with the ability to express themselves in ways they are more comfortable with.

Anyone working with autistic people should make an effort to understand their non-verbal communication methods, which may at times include crying, pointing, reaching for items, taking a person's hand, or employing echolalia, the act of repeating words without necessarily understanding their meaning, as discussed in previous modules.

Other communication methods such as sign language, Makaton, and visual cues are also likely to be used and are sometimes easier for others in the community to interpret or understand.

Helpers and teachers can support non-verbal autistic people in their communication development. Through slowing down the pace, following the individual's lead, working face to face, modelling language, imitating words and actions, and giving feedback, it can be conveyed that what the individual is communicating is understood.

Anyone can support a non-verbal person on the autism spectrum by using gestures and visual aids when communicating.

Gestures, actions, nodding or shaking the head to indicate yes or no, and waving hello and goodbye are all excellent examples of non-verbal communication that can be easily relayed back to an autistic person. If preferred, visual cues, items such as photographs, picture timetables, drawings and cue cards can be used.

Another method includes using voice output communication aids (VOCAs). Also known as speech-generating devices (SGDs), they produce digitised speech for the user.

By using any of these augmentative and alternative communication support methods, the subsequent result can mean the autistic person is able to have their needs met and their feelings and wishes

expressed.

Whilst it's essential to support and understand the non-verbal communication of people on the autism spectrum, it's also wise to encourage communication and interaction. For example, to encourage requests, a child can be offered a toy that's challenging to use, given a high-interest object, given items they want gradually, or be allowed to decide when to end an activity.

These are just a few examples of how opportunities can be found to interact, which may potentially encourage some verbal communication or improve and further support non-verbal communication.

Take a Quick Recap Test

[viralQuiz id=96]

8.8 What We've Learned

In this module, we discussed the best practices used for supporting autistic individuals, especially when it comes to ensuring their safety.

There are a variety of settings and scenarios where best practices must be employed, including the home, school, health care environments, the community and in the workplace.

We examined how to ensure a safe environment at all times, addressing common concerns for autistic children such as preventing wandering and access to off-limits areas and items.

We reviewed information regarding safety and understanding at medical appointments and the importance of reinforcing sexual safety for autistic individuals.

We also discussed how to organise the home and school environments in a way that is better suited to their safety. This included safety intervention and guidance on developing an autism safety plan and emergency contact sheets.

Visual strategies for maintaining best practices and ensuring safety were examined. These include using labels, charts and picture cues.

Finally, we reviewed the various aspects of non-verbal communication and their role in supporting autistic people. These include sign language, Makaton, and gestures to facilitate and encourage conversation.

Summary

After completing this module, you should be well-versed in best practices when working with autistic individuals. You should understand the correct environments for the implementation of these practices in order to support people on the autism spectrum.

You should recognise the common safety concerns for autistic children, and what practical and sensible steps can be taken to ensure a safe environment at all times. You will also have developed a good understanding of visual strategies that can form the basis of best practices for communicating with non-verbal autistic people.

Finally, you will have increased your knowledge of the various aspects of non-verbal communication, which ones are often employed, and how they can help support autistic people.

In the next module, we will take a look at organisational considerations for people on the autism spectrum, including at home, at school, at work, and out in society. We will also discuss helpful resources for autistic people, their families, and anyone else who supports them.
