

# A guide for positive behaviour support



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# Preface

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Autism is a condition that affects how a person thinks, feels, interacts with others, and experiences their environment. It is a lifelong disability. Every Autistic person is different to every other. This is why autism is described as a 'spectrum'.

People on the autism spectrum often have poor quality of life and experience significant health and wellbeing concerns. Autistic people are often not well understood, supported or accepted in society. Autistic people routinely face stressful environments, negative interactions with other people and do not receive the supports they need or have a right to. As a result, there may be behaviours of concern.

## What is Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)?

Behaviours of concern are behaviours that people may engage in that hurt themselves and other people. These behaviours may make it harder for that person to have a good quality of life. This does not include autistic behaviours such as 'stimming' that can be a form of self-regulation.

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) is person-centred, evidence-based framework that aims to improve quality of life where there may be behaviours of concern. PBS does not try to change autism. PBS understands that behaviours of concern occur for a reason and communicates important information about a person's stress, distress and support needs. PBS understands that behaviours of concern happen because of an interaction between:

1. The individual, their current and past experiences and what they have learned.
2. The thoughts, feelings and behaviours of other people in their lives.
3. The environments, communities and cultures they live in.

This means that changes and supports are focussed not just on the individual, but rather the people around them and the environments, communities and cultures they live in. PBS also makes sure that emotions, past trauma, communication and sensory likes and dislikes are all considered with providing supports. The social model of disability and considering the "double empathy theory" are also important in PBS.

## Aspect's Approach to PBS

Whilst PBS is not an autism-specific approach, Aspect works in partnership with Autistic people in research, governance, service planning and service delivery. This led to a statement about evidence-based practice that specifically references strategies that meet the 'aspirations, preferences and values of people on the autism spectrum' and 'are positive and not painful or distressing, respect the full diversity of Autistic people and can contribute towards an Autistic person's satisfaction with their quality of life and their inclusion in society'.

PBS is one part of Aspect's Comprehensive Approach (ACA). This means that there is an Aspect wide approach to PBS, and an individualised approach to PBS.

Aspect's approach to PBS has been reviewed and developed via numerous consultations with Autistic people and Autistic researchers. Aspect employs a range of Autistic staff (including Autistic PBS Practitioners) who implement PBS with people on the autism spectrum.

PBS, when done well and as a person-centred approach, should be neuroaffirming. Aspect's approach to PBS:

- Places the person's likes, dislikes, needs and wishes at the centre of every decision or support; and
- Works with the person at the centre of the service and engages the person in a way that is preferable for them.

This manual was developed to give families and carers the ability to understand and manage behaviours of concern, within their home, school and community settings.



# What is the link between autism and behaviours of concern?

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Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition of which the cause is unknown. When an individual is diagnosed as autistic, there are two main categories in which there are differences or potential supports required:

- Social communication
- Patterns of behaviour

## Social communication

Communication is much more than using words and language, it involves gestures, body language, facial expressions to show what we mean, how we are feeling and to engage with others. Children on the autism spectrum may have differences in their social communication, such as:

- social initiation and social responses
- less or variable eye contact
- challenges in using, understanding and responding to gestures
- recognising facial expressions
- two-way conversation with others
- adjusting social behaviour to different contexts
- understanding and using verbal and non-verbal communication
- variable ability to develop, maintain and understand relationships with others.

When there are difficulties and breakdowns in communication, behaviours of concern can occur. There are a number of areas where communication may be difficult for children, leading to behaviours of concern. In addition, others supporting the child may not be able to understand or respond appropriately to communication attempts. Communication is always two way - behaviours of concern can be about a communication breakdowns on both sides.

Communication	
Characteristic of autism	Potential behaviour
Limited or different expressive verbal and non-verbal communication	The child may be frustrated due to being misunderstood and may use behaviours of concern to meet needs
Limited or different verbal and non-verbal receptive communication	The child may be anxious as not sure what is happening, using behaviours of concern to cope. Apparent "disobedience" may result from not understanding what is asked
Varied and inconsistent communication skills	Others may overestimate communication skills and not accommodate needs
Differences in interpreting non-verbal cues	The child may seem to others as purposefully disobeying and ignoring
Feeling socially isolated and bored due to communication barriers	May engage in behaviours of concern to cope with these feelings

Children on the autism spectrum often want to engage with others, but may have difficulty understanding how to do so. Some children may not wish to engage with other people very often, but are often forced to do so in a school or community.





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Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) is Australia's largest autism-specific service provider, with one of the biggest evidence informed autism-specific schools programs in the world. A not-for-profit organisation, we work in partnership with people of all ages on the autism spectrum and their families to deliver positive, practical supports, services, practices and research that recognise *a different brilliant*<sup>®</sup> - *understanding, engaging and celebrating the strengths and interests of people on the autism spectrum.*

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