

Managing repetitive behaviours during COVID-19 *Supporting your child with additional needs*

Understanding repetitive behaviours in autism

Many children with autism (and some other neurodevelopmental conditions) **use repetitive behaviours as a way of calming down**. They can also provide a sense of sameness and predictability which children on the autism spectrum find comforting. Repetitive behaviours might include playing the same game or video clip over and over again, asking the same questions, repeating the same sequence of actions or physical behaviours such as spinning around, blinking, jumping or walking up and down.

For some children, repetitive behaviours can become 'compulsions'. This means a child feels they need to complete a behaviour (or to repeat it) to prevent something bad happening. Unfortunately these behaviours can cause a child to feel more anxious, and can sometimes lead to a 'vicious cycle' where the child has 'intrusive thoughts' about bad things happening, which they try to get rid of by doing these behaviours we call 'compulsions'.

When do repetitive behaviours become a problem?

For lots of children with autism, repetitive behaviours can be a really helpful way of managing anxiety and helping to keep their world predictable.

However, repetitive behaviours can become a problem if they:

- start to interfere with the child's usual day to day life
- stop children from doing activities they enjoy
- cause the child or other people physical harm
- seem to cause the child further anxiety.

If none of the above are true, then it's generally fine to allow children to continue.

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Impact of COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic might have caused an increase in repetitive behaviours for many children with autism. There are two main reasons for this:

1. **Life is uncertain and the things we can and can't do are changing all the time.** We know that uncertainty and change are major causes of anxiety for people with autism. If your child is experiencing anxiety, they will use strategies such as repetitive behaviours to try and regulate their emotions.
2. **The public health advice encourages behaviours which have the potential to be 'compulsive'.** E.g. washing hands frequently, avoiding places we might 'catch' COVID-19, only leaving home for certain reasons. Information in the news or on social media may trigger anxious thoughts and feelings, and lead to even more of these behaviours. It is also going to be a particularly difficult time for children who already had fears of germs or contamination, health anxiety and for those who have strong feelings of responsibility towards others.

Regardless of the reason, the following ideas might help with managing an increase in repetitive behaviours.

Think Feelings

It's important to remember that it's really normal to feel anxious at the moment. Most of us will be feeling more worried than usual, and avoiding certain places or activities.

This is just as true for children with autism. Your child might be worried about what could happen to them or family members. They might be anxious because their routine has been disrupted or worried about big changes such as going back to school.

Be a 'feelings detective' and **try to work out why your child might be anxious.** Some children might be able to talk about or draw their feelings. Many might need you to make some guesses about what they are feeling to help them understand.

Reassure your child that their feelings are normal and that lots of people are feeling like this.

See our 'Anxiety top tips' leaflet for some more ideas.

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Think Routine

Having a clear routine each day will help reduce your child's anxiety. It provides structure (so your child knows what is happening) and stops your child having too much time to focus on thoughts which are making them anxious.



Try to have a routine at home. Where possible try to stick to similar bedtimes and meal times each day. (This might feel tricky but will help to make each day predictable.)

Remember to include activities your child enjoys and activities that relax and calm them. E.g. watching a favourite film, listening to music or exercising in the garden. (Remember this is different for every child.)

Think boundaries – following advice on handwashing

Current government guidelines suggest we wash our hands regularly for 20 seconds when we need to. If your child is anxious, or experiencing 'intrusive thoughts', they might start to wash their hands more often or for longer than they need to. Over time, washing hands too much might make your child more anxious.

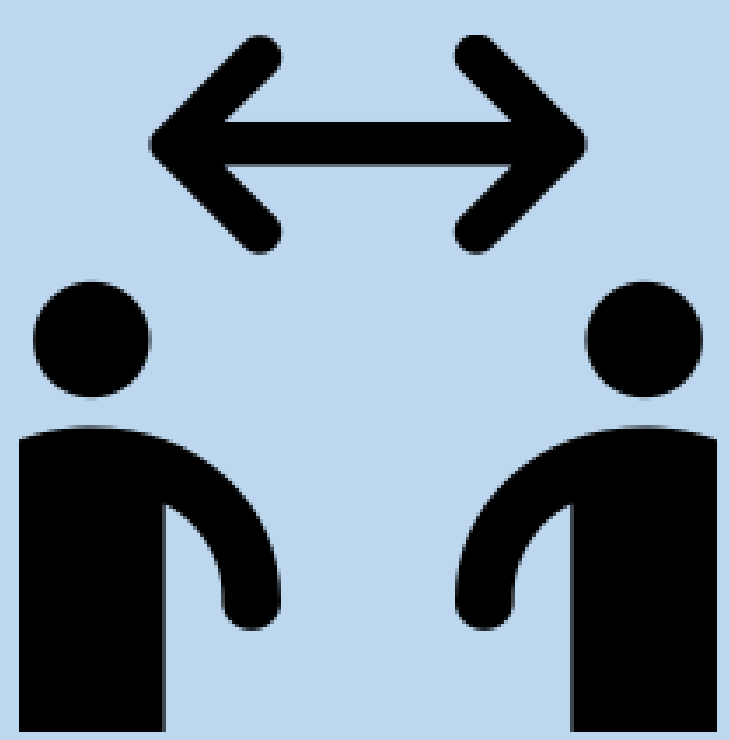


- Encourage your child to follow the public health advice, **but don't let them do more:**
 - Use a timer while washing hands and encourage your child to stop after 20 seconds
OR
 - Sing a handwashing song (and stop when the song is finished)
- **Make a list** of when your child needs to wash their hands and agree it with them
- Remind your child they are following the public health advice and they do not need to do more.
- Your child might have some days where they find it really hard to 'follow the advice but don't do more'. This is often related to how they are feeling and what has been happening that day. On more difficult days, it might be helpful to give them a break.

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Think boundaries – following advice on social distancing

For other government advice, such as social distancing, it is again good to encourage your child to follow this advice to keep them and others safe.



However, **discourage them from doing more than they need to** e.g. Avoiding people altogether; avoiding going out.

If your child is feeling anxious about going out, please see our leaflet 'anxiety about going out during COVID-19'.

Think Boundaries – limiting news and social media

The coronavirus outbreak has been a big event, affecting the whole world. This means there is almost constant news and updates on the Internet and TV. You or your child might want to read or watch the news. This is fine, but be aware that **too much news might make your child worry more.**

- **Stick to trustworthy websites** which give you accurate information such as gov.uk, NHS111 and BBC news.
- **Limit watching TV news and reading news websites** e.g. once a day for 10 minutes.
- Where possible, **watch and read the news with your child.** Being with them means you can help them to make sense of it.
- If you have an older child, they may prefer to watch or read the news on their own. Here, it may be helpful **to check in with your child regularly** about what they have seen and read. Talking about it can help them to understand the information better. It can also let you know whether they may have misunderstood anything.
- Using social media such as Facebook and Instagram: It might be helpful to explain to your child that news on social media is often less accurate and might even be made up. In some cases, it might be that you need to reduce your child's time on social media.

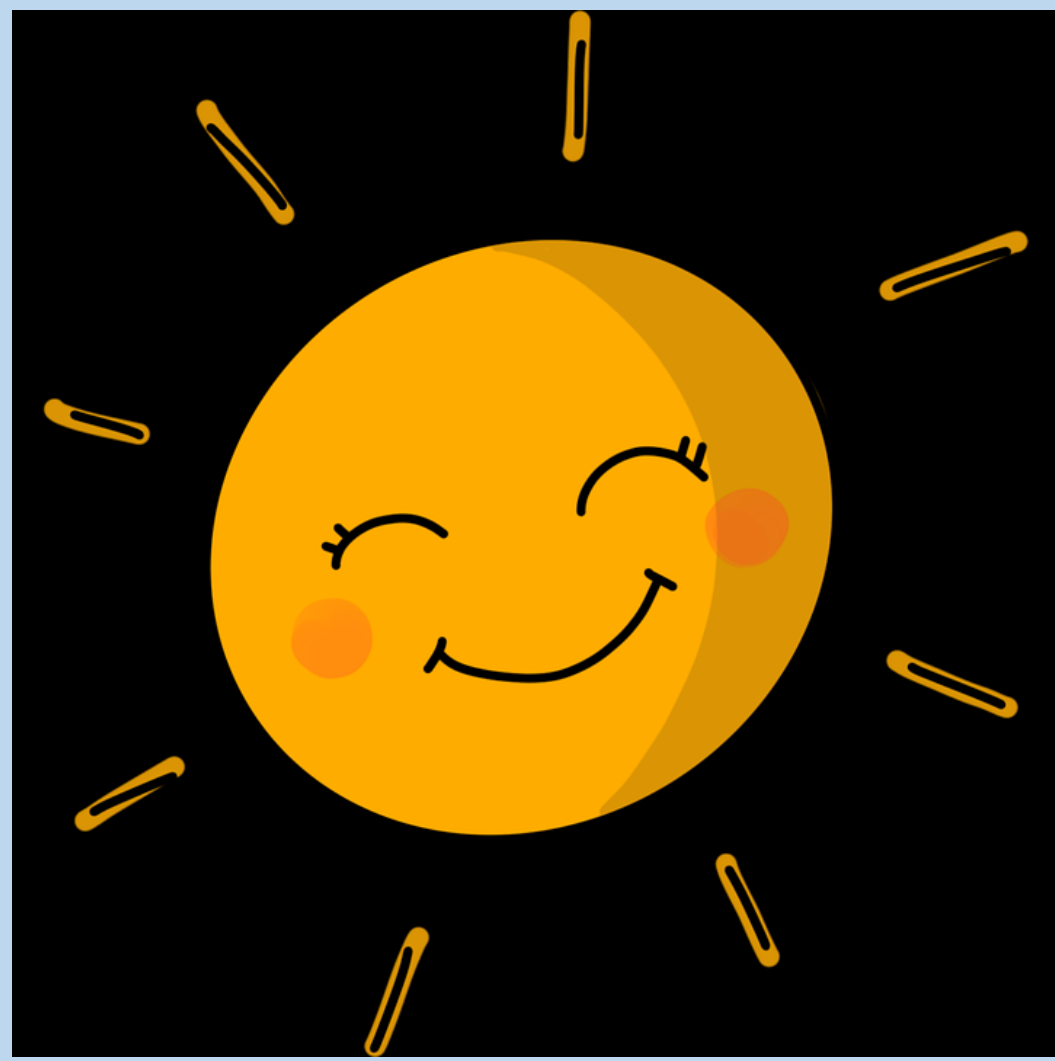


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Think Positivity

In these tricky times, when your child has lots of worries, it is important to surround them with positivity. **How you respond is likely to affect how your child responds.** Try to remain positive even though sometimes this might be hard.



It is also important your child knows that you are proud of them. Let them know what they are doing well, no matter how small. Some children might need more physical contact with parents e.g. hugs, sitting next to each other.

Think You

It is really important that you **take care of your own needs** as well as your child's. Try and be aware of how you feel and **do an activity you find enjoyable or relaxing when your feelings get too much.**

It is OK to take some time out to recharge your own batteries. Remember, you are the best support to your child when you are feeling good yourself!



Further information

Sheffield Children's Hospital COVID-19 resources:

<https://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/patients-and-parents/coronavirus-resources-for-children-and-families/>

National Autistic Society – guidance and helpline for parents, young people and staff:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/helpful-resources.aspx>

if you are still concerned about your child's repetitive behaviours after trying out the strategies in this booklet, please speak to your Ryegate clinician or GP.