



# Dealing with “Aggressive” or “Unsafe” Behaviors – Part 2

The following are only **suggestions** and will not necessarily apply to all children. Determining **if** or **how** to apply these strategies should be based on the child’s age, communication skills, cognitive and self-regulation abilities. Work closely with your ASD Clinician or other professionals to determine which would be appropriate.

## For “Unsafe” Behaviors such as Running Away or “Bolting” - General Guidelines & Strategies

- Try to determine what the child is **gaining** from the behavior:
  - To **get to** a certain area or object (e.g. a favorite toy, room, car, etc)?
  - To **avoid** or **escape from** a certain activity, person, or situation (e.g. a noisy or hectic environment; an unstructured or confusing situation)
  - To meet a need for physical movement?
- Teach child appropriate ways to **communicate** their wants and needs and recognize their positive attempts to do so
- For children who are “bolting” because they are not yet able to ask for a break, teach them to say or sign “break” or give someone a break card instead of bolting
- Use visual supports (e.g. timers, visual schedules) to help child understand what is happening and what is expected. For example, a child may bolt because they don’t yet understanding that the current activity is **ending soon** and their favorite activity is coming **next**
- Remember that because of their neurological differences, many children with ASD often communicate, interact and play like much younger children.

## For Behaviors such as Jumping, Pushing and Knocking Things Down

- For some children, it is helpful to keep in mind their younger developmental level. For example, a teenage child may still enjoy playing at a “developmentally younger” stage which involves physical play or exploring things by throwing, banging or dropping them.
- Redirecting and **replacing** the behavior with a more “socially desirable” one should be the main focus. For example, have a variety of more appropriate sensory-seeking activities that he can choose from (e.g. throwing of soft toys into a bucket, jumping on a mini-trampoline, etc.)

- Respond quickly and positively to more “socially desirable” replacement behaviors.
- Respond as slowly and calmly as possible to less desirable behaviors. Avoid big reactions (e.g. yelling or “animated” facial expressions) – this can often reinforce these behavior(s)
- If available, work closely with the child’s Occupational Therapist to explore ways of satisfying sensory needs.
- Use Picture Schedules, PECS systems, and other visual cues (i.e., cardboard STOP signs) to let the child choose activities and to aide transitions to and from these activities.

### Additional Resources

- Gregory, J. (2000). Bringing up a challenging child at home: When love is not enough. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
  - Hodgdon, L.A. (1999). Solving behavior problems in autism: Improving communication with visual strategies. Troy, MI: Quirk Roberts Publishing.
  - Koegel, L.K.; Koegel, R.L. and Dunlap, G. (1996). Positive behavioral support: Including people with difficult behavior in the community. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Co.
  - Lucyshyn, J.M.; Dunlap, G. and Albin, R.W. (2002). Families and positive behavior support: Addressing problem behavior in family contexts. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Co.
  - Myles, B.S. & Southwick, J. (1999). Asperger syndrome and difficult moments: Practical solutions for tantrums, rage, and meltdowns. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.
  - O’Neill, R.E.; Horner, R.H.; Albin, R.W.; Sprague, J.R.; Storey, K. and Newton, J.S. (1997). Functional assessment and program development for problem behavior: A practical handbook. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
  - Reichle, J. & Wacker, D.P. (1993). Communicative alternatives to challenging behavior: Integrating functional assessment and intervention strategies. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Co.
  - Waltz, M. (2000). Obsessive-compulsive disorder: Help for children and adolescents. Cambridge, MA: Patient-Centered Guides. Arlington, TX: Future Horizon, Inc.
  - Whitaker, P. (2001). Challenging behavior and autism: Making sense – making progress. Shawnee Mission, KS: The Autism Asperger Publishing Company.
- ❖ **For more information and tools to address your child’s behaviors, see the handouts**
- ***“Understanding your child’s behavior - part 1”***
  - ***“Understanding your child’s behavior - part 2”***

**Medical Review:**  
Garrett Watanabe, M.D.

**Author:**  
Andrew Shahan, M.A.  
ASD Regional Health Educator

**Last Updated:**  
September 2009