

Lesson 2: Behaviour

You can read the content of the lesson 2 videos here.

Cognition

Theory of mind, or the ability to mentalize, involves grasping the concept that other people have thoughts and having awareness of how they think. When children are around age four, we tend to notice that they understand that others can think, believe, and know different things. In other words: other people are not thinking the same thoughts as you. Gradually, the child gets better at reading people and being able to predict their thoughts and behaviours.

People with autism are less capable of mentalizing, making it harder to see things from others' perspectives; they often only see things from their own point of view. It is also difficult for them to interpret other people's feelings and expectations.

That does not mean a lack of empathy. On the contrary, people with autism may be especially sensitive to moods, but may struggle to understand the cause or know how to act. It is especially difficult if you are emotionally involved in the situation.

Since the capacity for mentalization is often delayed with autism and does not operate as intuitively, it may be necessary to learn what is typical and what reactions might be appropriate in different social situations.

Young people with autism can often figure out who knows or thinks what, purely theoretically, but they might have a hard time keeping up in real-life situations in which it is necessary to be quick and flexible.

Handling complex social situations can be very energy intensive. Central coherence is the ability to quickly perceive the essentials and overarching context when faced with new information or a new situation. This is the basis of our ability to generalise, that is, to be able to see that occurrences are similar, despite not being identical in every detail. People with autism often start from the details and might have a hard time filtering out less important things in the context. It takes longer to process information and being in new situations is exhausting.

Executive functions are about how you survey and control your thoughts and actions. This covers a range of skills, such as working memory, planning, flexibility and impulse control. Planning and flexibility are harder for people with autism.

For example, something like a morning routine requires more executive functions than you may realise. You have to be able to plan what needs to be done and in what order. You have to be flexible if something does not go as anticipated, for example if your phone is dead or if you are out of milk.

Perception

Now we will discuss perception. Perception is how we interpret our sensory impressions and how they interact with one another. We have external and internal senses. We use our external senses to make interpretations; these include sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.

The internal senses are how we interpret our body relative to our surroundings. Proprioception is the ability to feel where your body is in space relative to yourself and to your surroundings.

This means understanding that your body parts are connected, that the torso is connected to the arms and legs, and how the parts move relative to one another. For example, I know that I am reaching one hand into the air, even though my eyes are closed. That is proprioception.

The vestibular sense is how we interpret movements of the head. It helps stabilise our eyes as we move around and is closely connected to sight and sound. The vestibular system is also a form of volume control. This is what adjusts the degree of various sensory inputs that we let in, so that we can adapt throughout the day and not take in too much of the sensory inputs that come towards us.

Together, these internal senses form what you might call a level for the body, allowing us to assess distances more easily, for example. They also enable us to walk on stairs or on a boat as it rocks back and forth.

Perception differences

People with autism often perceive things differently, but this can manifest in different ways. For example, they might be hypersensitive or hyposensitive to various sensory inputs.

If a light is flashing, they may squint, or find it too bright, or have a strong reaction, for example.

They might find some everyday sounds too loud and disturbing, such as a vacuum cleaner or a certain kind of laughter. Meanwhile, sounds that others find disturbing may be perceived as soothing, and that is another way that perception can vary.

They may react to certain foods and struggle to eat some foods. Usually, that is a combination of taste, smell and consistency.

The internal senses can also lead to different movement patterns or to doing certain activities with different body positions. For example, lying down and eating or lying upside down on the couch while watching TV and other things like that. In this way, we see that they have different proprioception, as discussed earlier.

Another factor that differs is that they may experience fragmented perception, which means they get stuck in the details. They might take in the details of sensory input, but miss the whole picture.

They may be slower to process sensory input, which can cause a reaction to a particular sense impression to occur well after they saw, heard, or experienced the input. This may result in a reaction that seems too strong in the current situation. It may be difficult for people to understand why a child reacts so strongly to something that happened quite a while ago.

Another example of a different way of perceiving is that these children are often sensitive to new clothing and how clothes feel on their body; they might want labels to be removed from clothing. They may be sensitive to certain kinds of touch, finding touch very uncomfortable in a way that most others would not. It is important to pay attention and understand what the child is sensitive to.

They may also find other sounds uncomfortable – such as hearing cornflakes rattle into a bowl, or some other sound – while sounds that others find uncomfortable do not bother the child at all.

They might be hypersensitive or hyposensitive to warmth or cold, which can impact what they want to wear on hot or cold days. It might not be at all consistent with what you, as a parent, think your child should be wearing.

Adapt the environment

These examples of different ways of perceiving clearly show the importance of making adaptations to the environment, and not trying to change the person.

If someone complains that the volume is too loud in a room, then we turn the volume down. We don't try to change their ears.

This is an example of how we need to adapt the environment, not change the child's behavioural and perception differences.

Social perception

Social perception is about sensory impressions taken in via social interaction.

A person with perception differences will most likely behave differently in social interactions, because they interpret sensory input and non-verbal signals differently.

You have surely noticed this in your children. They might overreact and interpret a tired and mildly irritated tone as angry, or they might have a slower reaction that sets in later on.

Social interactions can therefore be very exhausting and energy-intensive for people with autism.

Perception and behaviour

Most things that people do serve a function. This is also true of people with autism, even if others might think some things seem meaningless or strange.

We act or react for different reasons, depending on different things. It may be because it feels enjoyable. It may provide meaning or context.

It might also enable us to regulate our emotions and allow us to control strong feelings in a given situation. Or we might gain or regain control.

People with autism don't experience a need to do what everyone else is doing or imitate others in order to fit in in different situations. You might say: they don't have a social autopilot. They don't feel a need to act as others expect them to act, which can lead to situations in which they are perceived as behaving strangely, or overreacting in situations they did not anticipate.

Understanding the child's perception differences can make it easier to understand their reactions and behaviours.

Common behaviours

Here is a list of common behaviours in people with autism that may be connected to a lack of flexibility and focusing on the details.

- People with autism are keen to create structure in what they do, for example by collecting, storing and lining up objects or information and facts.
- They also tend to repeat actions or activities the same way every time, like a routine or ritual. Some have special sounds or movements that they carry out repeatedly. These are called stereotypies. Having or doing things in a particular way produces a feeling of control and safety, especially if many of the things around them are messy or new.
- They have difficulty handling uncertainty, unpredictability and lack of clarity. For example, accepting that a rule might apply sometimes and not others, that it can depend on the circumstances.
- They might easily get caught up in right or wrong, so-called black-and-white thinking. Many parents find this challenging, because it can lead to outbursts or shutting down if things don't go the way the child or young person had expected.
- People with autism may also find it difficult if an activity is interrupted, and many are resistant to trying new things.
- Anyone can have special interests, but with autism, these interests are often very strong and may take over periodically. However, special interests can also be an asset that can be used to motivate a child in their schoolwork, for example. Starting from the interest offers better opportunities to further develop skills and knowledge than trying to introduce something brand new.

Daily challenges

We will now discuss daily challenges connected to behaviours.

Behaviours that are difficult to predict or that clash with the expectations of the environment can be particularly challenging.

Some behaviours are harmful to the child or their surroundings. It is important that, as a parent, you try to understand what is motivating your child's behaviour to make it easier for you to adjust the environment to help the child calm down. And remember in particular what we discussed: their perceptions may take longer to process.

A reaction might arrive later than expected and it might be important to take a step back and say: Okay, what happened just before that led the child to react this way?

Often, this may be an expression of different kinds of emotions, both positive and negative, such as worry, exhilaration, joy, or anger. And it may be important to determine what emotion is at play here.

Daily challenges may intensify when the child doesn't know exactly what is expected. There might be a new situation, or something might have happened suddenly and the child was unprepared. It can be especially important to be highly intentional about helping the child to be as prepared as possible in new situations.

Examples of daily challenges

Here are a few examples of daily challenges. We will go through some of them and discuss how to solve different situations.

- **Hygiene:** Hygiene is a common source of conflict. Many children with autism find it difficult to shower, for example. And this can be harder the older the child gets, both because it is necessary to manage hygiene more often at that point, and due to an expectation that the child should be able to manage by themselves as they get older. As a result, this challenge can intensify.
- **Clothing:** Clothing is another challenge. For example, the older the child gets, the more they will want to express their own style – which might not be what parents had in mind for the child. You may need to talk about it, to the extent possible, but also allow your child to develop their own style. This challenge might also involve not wearing seasonally appropriate attire. Because of their perception differences, the child might not care if it is cold out, because they might not experience coldness the same way other people do. This means they might not want to wear a hat, or they might wear shorts in December. Or the opposite: they might wear clothing that is too warm when it is 25 degrees and sunny outside. And this can result in conflict at home.

- **Food:** A third situation or everyday challenge is food. Many children with autism may eat selectively: they might only eat certain types of food, or they might avoid certain consistencies or aromas; they might absolutely not eat soup, or whatever it may be. At mealtimes, they might not want to sit with their family and need to look at a screen, or something similar. You may also need to make adjustments there.
- **Bedtime or circadian rhythm:** Bedtime or your child's circadian rhythm might be a source of conflict or a daily challenge. And this too might increase with age, because teens may be more inclined to want to decide when they go to bed or when it is time to shut down screens and so on.
- **School and homework:** Other issues might include managing school and homework, or keeping track of time, for example when it's time to head off to practice or to leave home. It could be packing a backpack in the morning and what to bring. Things like this can be solved.

Many of the things I've brought up can be solved with good planning, and by giving your child more opportunities to take care of themselves and take personal responsibility, for example with visual support, which we'll go through in lesson 3.

When it comes to holidays, travel and new environments, it's important to try to create predictability for the child while operating outside of their usual routines.

Do so by answering a number of questions:

- Where will we be?
- When will we go there?
- How will we get there?
- What will we do when we arrive?
- Who will I be with?

Something else that can be especially challenging with teenagers is that they might express their opinions in a way that is unacceptable. This kind of behaviour may happen more with age and might be a source of conflict, because your child or teen doesn't understand the other person's reaction.

You may need to be available to try to explain how it can affect others when you say things a certain way.

The Stress Cup

We all have different abilities and they are not constant. Our abilities depend on our basic conditions, but they are also impacted by various factors in a given situation.

The number of factors matters when it comes to how much or how little access we have to our abilities.

Take a look at the picture of the two cups (*see stress cup video*), and you can see that it is important to understand what might be challenging for someone with

autism in a given situation. In this picture illustrating a situation in the morning, we see that factors like picking out clothing, showering and the yoghurt being out matter for people with autism. So does the fact that the bus is late and there is a substitute teacher at school.

We also see how these aren't the same factors that affect someone who doesn't have autism. So the number of factors and how they impact us will affect whether or not the cup runs over.

What can we do to help someone who has autism?

We might need to open the tap on the cup and try to take preventive action, and maybe change and clarify things for the child with autism. For example, they could pick out clothes the day before, and maybe also shower the night before school. Check to make sure you have their favourite yoghurt the day before, so that it isn't all gone in the morning. The late bus can't really be helped, nor can the substitute teacher at school. But if the school is collaborative with you and you've established some kind of communication with them, maybe they can let you know if there will be a substitute teacher, which gives you a chance to prepare your child. This can help make life less challenging for someone with autism.

Reasonable expectations

How much support a young person with autism needs can vary greatly from situation to situation and from one day to the next.

Getting it right requires realistic expectations based on their capability, and as a parent, meeting societal demands as well as the young person's beliefs and expectations.

Provocative behaviour often indicates an imbalance between support and challenge.

At that point, it is time to take a step back and perhaps go through the thought model to gain a better understanding of your child's reaction.

With slightly older kids or with teens, it may be good to come up with some solutions together in a shared problem-solving exercise.

Shared problem-solving

Shared problem-solving is exactly what it sounds like. You and the child solve the challenge together. This process is generally split into three steps.

1. First: determine what is hard for the child – the factor that the child finds difficult in this situation. Once you, the adult, have an overall understanding, then repeat what the child said so that you have the same sense of what it is that's difficult.

2. Step two is for the adult to explain to the child why it is important for you to solve the problem.
3. Once both of your difficulties have been clarified, it is time to open things up for discussion. Is there any way we can solve this problem so that we are both satisfied?

An example of shared problem-solving:

My daughter Ulrika is twelve years old. She finds it hard to shower on some days.

- Ulrika, I noticed that you have a hard time taking a shower on some days. What do you think of that?
- I don't know... it's just boring.
- Okay... just boring?
- Boring and annoying...
- Why is that?
- I don't know.
- It's just boring and annoying?
- Yeah, like...
- I don't really understand. We have the same routines. I prepare for the shower. We have scheduled shower days. We have the same shampoo...
- I don't know, that isn't it... It's just unbelievably boring and a huge hassle.
- But what about the days that go well – why does that happen?
- Well that's Saturday; that's movie night. So then I have to hurry to get ready.
- Aha, I hadn't thought of that. There's something fun after the shower that makes it...
- Yeah, that's what I said...
- Okay. I think it would be great if we could fix Wednesdays, so that we don't have to argue every single Wednesday. It's such a drag.
- So I won't have to listen to you nagging me all the time! Sooo annoying...
- Do you think there's a way we could make it go well on Wednesdays too?
- Well, we could watch a movie.
- Well, but we can't, you know that. We can't watch movies on school nights. It gets too late and you won't be able to wake up the next morning. Is there anything else fun, other than watching a movie?
- No!
- Can you think about it a little?
- I'm going to go...
- We'll take a break and talk again later.

- Ulrika, can you come here for a minute? We were going to keep talking about the Wednesday showers. Have you thought about it?
- No.
- Okay, a movie is too long.
- Okay.
- Is there anything shorter that you could watch afterward?
- No, I don't know...

- Could we play music?
- No, that's so boring.
- Is there a good series?
- No, series all suck.
- Is there something with shorter episodes?
- Maybe Idol? It's 30...
- That's perfect!
- I just have to check which ones I've seen. I haven't seen this.
- Aha! Well, would that feel good for you; you can watch the show after...
- Before...
- AFTER your shower on Wednesdays – does that sound good?
- Okay.
- Great. Then that's what we'll do.